"Exotic, exciting,
darkly suspenseful
- a splendid novel"
Campbell Armstrong
VENOM
COLIN FALCONER

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PROLOGUE

August 1973

Delhi

René Budjinski did not hear a word of the public prosecutor's opening speech. He was reliving those last climactic hours in Varanasi, and asking himself, as he asked himself so many times, if it had all been worth it. The past year had seemed endless, waiting for this day when perhaps the sacrifice could be justified.

He stared at the back of the man’s head sitting in front of him, watched a bead of sweat squeeze from under the man's turban and find a wrinkled channel down the brown and creased neck.

Was it enough that they had him in chains, that the killing had stopped? What would they do to him? Would any punishment be enough?

He raised his head and searched the mass of faces. Michel was slouched in his chair, his wrists manacled in his lap. He wondered what he was feeling. Confusion? Fear? Panic? His face betrayed nothing.

Michel caught Budjinski's stare and a mocking half-smile formed on his lips.

But Budjinski did not see it. He was lost once more in his reverie; a skein of smoke rose over the grey river, he heard the sounds of his own screams. Over a year ago but the horror of it was still fresh in his memory.

He realized that the man next to him was staring. His hands had tightened into fists on the wooden bench and his body was shaking with the force of his rage.

If the Indians did not convict him he would kill this bastard himself.

♦ ♦ ♦

A few minutes before, standing at the window of his office in the heart of old Delhi, Judge Chandra Misra had watched the deluge of monsoon rain

that had assaulted the city all that morning. Overhead, the storm beat on the roof like a hail of copper nails.

‘Five minutes, Judge,’ a face at the half-open door informed him.

He nodded absently and continued to stare across the street. He was fascinated by the rain. There were times during the monsoon when it seemed that it would go on forever, relentless, until everything disappeared beneath the rising waters. But he reminded himself that all seasons, like all life, must pass.

Five minutes before noon; five minutes before a trial that had become the most eagerly awaited in Indian history. Judge Misra was unused to such publicity. Ordinarily, his little courtroom in the Tis Hizari complex would be almost empty.

But today was different.

First, the man accused was not an Indian citizen. Indeed, his true nationality had yet to be established. It was possible he did not have one. He had been born in post-war Saigon, the illegitimate son of a French mother and an Indian father. Of the many passports he was said to have used, none had been his own.

Second, although he was standing trial for just one rather bizarre attempted murder, police in five other Asian countries were collecting evidence linking him to unsolved murders within their own borders. Interpol had collected an inventory of corpses from the mean streets of Manila to the lake boats in Kashmir. Most were strangled. Some had had their throats cut.

All were linked to this one man.

Such a sensational case was enough on its own to attract the attentions of the Press, but then there was the girl; young, and very beautiful. A French model whose face had appeared on the covers of magazines such as Vogue and Cosmopolitan.

Now another heady ingredient had been added to this cocktail; the man who had been chosen to defend the accused was the Nawab of Pashan, India's most celebrated trial lawyer, a man accustomed to having flashbulbs pop wherever he went.

Yes, it would be a good day for the papers.

Even so Judge Misra could not suppress a feeling of utter bewilderment as he entered his courtroom on the stroke of noon. His wife had tried to impress upon him what to expect, but as he looked around at

the press of eager, curious faces he was surprised to discover that his hands were shaking.

The court itself was small, just thirty paces between the walls, with an elevated section at one end where he now sat and surveyed his packed chambers. The heat in the room was almost a tangible thing. The ceiling fans moved slowly, as if trying to stir some thick, heavy liquid.

The authorities were taking no chances with their celebrated prisoner. Everyone in the court had been body-searched before being allowed past the gauntlet of soldiers that ringed the court, bayonets fixed. The accused man was almost invisible among the phalanx of armed soldiers that surrounded him.

Many of the seats were occupied by newspaper and magazine reporters. There were representatives from the *Bangkok Post*, the *Straits Times*, *Paris Match*, *Le Figaro*, even the *New York Times*. Judge Misra wondered how they would react to seeing Indian justice in action.

He found it incredible that life had chosen him from amongst all the judges in Delhi to preside over such a public spectacle. He knew he would not be remembered by future generations of legal minds for his incisive intellect or his eloquence; he was aware of his own limitations, even comfortable with them. Until now.

The air of expectation caused a sudden dramatic silence in the room. Even the rains that had pounded the roof of the Tis Hizari all morning stopped abruptly.

All things must pass. Even seasons, even life.

There was no rapping of a gavel, as in the west, no bringing the courtroom to order. He just peered through his thick, horn-rimmed glasses at the public prosecutor and nodded his head.

The trial of Michel Christian had begun.

Bombay

Joginder Krisnan choked back another wave of pain. From the bed where he had lain for the past five years he could tell from the passage of the shadows on the wall that it was time.

There was a mirror on the dressing table by the bed and in it he could see his own reflection, distorted by the convex shape of the glass. It had

become his pleasure to gaze into it, and to empty his rage and contempt upon himself. For there was no pity left in him now, not even for himself.

What he saw in the mirror filled him with revulsion; an emaciated figure, the legs truncated at the thighs, the hairless body as thin as a girl's under the soiled white vest. Once he had been tall with the body of an athlete and the pigmentation of his skin so slight that he had been proud that many times he had been mistaken for a European. It had helped him with business and with women.

In later years his body had run to fat, but he had felt a perverse vanity about that, too, his extra pounds evidence to his burgeoning wealth. He had established profitable tailoring businesses in Saigon and Bombay, and he had been anticipating an indolent retirement in a villa somewhere in the shaded hills above the heat and dust and squalor of Maha Amma.

But for the last five years he had lain crippled in this shabby room, the best that his now modest means would allow.

That day in Saigon he lost everything: his legs, his money, his livelihood. He had not worked at his sewing table again. That little bastard. May he rot in hell.

He heard footsteps on the stairs. His youngest son, Ranchi, slouched into the room, carrying an enamel plate with rice and a watery curry. Joginder struggled to sit up. The boy watched him, unable or unwilling to conceal the disgust on his face.

‘I have brought your lunch, Father.’

‘Yes, yes. Put it down.’

The boy dropped the plate on the bedside table, spilling some of the meaty stew on to the floor.

‘Be careful, you idiot!’

‘Yes, Father.’

‘Get out of here!’

The boy shrugged his shoulders and left.

Children! Joginder thought. A burden and a curse. They were idle, his sons. Once he would have put them out on the street. Now he had no choice but to keep them. Who else would run his errands and cook his food now that his wife was dead?

As he reached for the food he felt a stab of pain in his legs. He gasped, clutching at the iron frame of the bed, a sudden greasy sweat erupting on his forehead. Even after all these years those two bullets ripped into his flesh

anew every day. He had found himself wishing more and more often that he could die. He could not remember the last time he had woken in the morning without a feeling of disappointment.

But before he could rest in his grave he anticipated that last, slow satisfaction of knowing he was dead too. Since the arrest Joginder had thought of nothing else. He had read everything that had been written in the papers. It sickened him that some of them made him out to be some sort of hero.

His one regret was that he was unable to go to Delhi himself, but his crippled legs made the journey impossible. He promised himself one last pleasure. On the day they hanged him he would afford himself the extravagance of a bottle of imported French champagne, and he would make a toast at the moment of his son’s execution.

He would savor the moment on his palate so that he could taste it again whenever the pain got too bad, and it would help him endure the long minutes and hours until the veil was finally drawn across the fragments of his life.

Delhi

As the public prosecutor began his opening address, the Nawab of Pashan arrived at the Tis Hizari in all his sartorial splendor, trailing a string of assistants and news reporters, like a comet’s tail.

He feigned an air of indifference to the heads that were craned in his direction as he made his way towards a hastily vacated chair on the right of the judge's bench. Flustered, the public prosecutor faltered over his speech. The case had barely begun and already he had drawn first blood.

The Nawab was slim, silver and articulate, with a luxuriant mane of hair combed straight back from his forehead. He was exceptionally fair for an Indian, the kind of man to whom most Indians instinctively deferred. He was one of the founding fathers of the new India, an author of the Constitution, an intimate of Nehru. He had known Gandhi; Gandhi had not liked him.

His face twisted to a frown as he surveyed the courtroom, the expression of a nobleman confronted with the smell of ordure while passing

the hovels of his serfs. He rarely sullied his hands with a case as gross as attempted murder.

He had not troubled himself with the pre-trial hearings and was only scantily familiar with the details of the case. But in India such negligence was unimportant. He might look like an aristocrat, but the Nawab was a playground bully, who specialized in the sort of savage cross- examination that could make sound evidence look faintly ridiculous.

‘Why are you in this case?’ one foreign reporter had asked him as he arrived outside.

‘Because the police have behaved disgracefully,’ he had said. Most of their evidence consists of letters and reports from foreign police forces. What does this have to do with the matter in question? The state has tried to make its flimsy case against my client more substantial by weighing it down with unsubstantiated accusations from abroad. I felt it was my duty to defend this man in order to protect the sanctity of justice in this country.’

In truth his motives were not as pure. He had been drawn to the case like a fly to droppings because he knew it would attract the full glare of public attention. He was hoping Indira Gandhi would appoint him to the High Court. As he settled himself into the cane-backed chair a few feet from Michel Christian, he did not afford his client a single glance. For, in truth, he didn't give a damn about him.

This was his show now.

Paris

Roland Fourget was one of the best plastic surgeons in France, if not Europe. He was attached to the burns unit at the St Jerome Hôpital and during his short career he had pioneered a number of techniques that were considered breakthroughs in the reconstruction of facial tissue.

The tragedy of a disfigurement was never less for any patient. But he privately experienced a unique poignancy in working with patients who had been beautiful before their injuries. For all his expertise, he knew he could never come close to reproducing what Nature had once created.

He steeled himself before entering the room. Unlike many of his colleagues, he found it difficult to be dispassionate about his work. It was the reason he had chosen to work with burns victims; cosmetic surgery for

its own sake did not interest him. He was not interested in vanity, only in healing.

His patient lay quite still, her head swathed in bandages. It was early afternoon and the blinds were drawn to keep out the bright sunlight, but he knew she was awake by the nervous sparrow-like movements of her right hand on the bed sheet.

He sat down on the edge of the bed. After all the operations he had performed, he still felt a nervous chill when he approached this moment of truth. He had done the best he could with what was left of her face but he had warned her not to expect too much. At this stage functionality was probably the best they could hope for.

He had seen a photograph of the girl, torn from the front cover of the French edition of Vogue and had been overcome by unspeakable sadness. How fragile such beauty was!

He carefully removed the dressings and examined the results and declared himself satisfied. He doubted that she would concur. If you looked at her from her right side, she was still beautiful, for one half of her face had not been exposed to the heat. Look at her from the left, though, and she looked like a wax effigy left too close to a flame. The raw and swollen flesh would lose its redness but she would always attract stares whenever she went; nothing like the looks she had no doubt been accustomed to before.

If only he had had more to work with.

He thought she would ask for a mirror and was grateful when she did not.

‘Thank you, Roland.’ The words were slurred, the scarring on one side of her mouth blurring her speech.

‘Another six months perhaps. We could attempt more surgery ...’

‘Yes, perhaps.’ She looked away. ‘The trial begins today. It's time you discharged me, I think.’

Delhi

In the Tis Hizari courtroom, Public Prosecutor Mohinder Singh glared with undisguised resentment as the Nawab of Pashan made his entrance, like a maharajah sweeping into his throne room. He was aware that every

head had turned in the Great One’s direction; and no one was listening to his address.

He had anticipated as much.

Mohinder Singh was young, intense and painfully thin. His most spectacular feature was the thick magenta-hued glasses which lent him an owl-like intensity. He wore a pair of baggy black trousers, and a black cotton coat thread-bare at the cuff. Perspiration marks already seeped into the cloth between his shoulders. His blue turban was askew and mottled with damp.

By contrast, the Nawab was immaculately tailored in grey striped trousers and a tailored blue serge jacket. What was even more galling, his adversary appeared comfortable in the steamy atmosphere of the courtroom, as if his high caste would not tolerate the appearance of sweat in public.

The Nawab was in no hurry to get to his seat. Mohinder Singh forced himself to look away and continued with his opening address, even though he knew that he was, in effect, speaking to himself.

PART ONE

Adrienne 1946-52

CHAPTER 1

Saigon

June 1946

It was a sultry afternoon in June, the rainy season. The rains beat on the roof of the arcade, flooding the street drains and spilling on to the cracked pavements. Adrienne Christian's blue frock was stained with mud. She hurried past the iron-shuttered shophouses along the Rue Le Loi, the umbrella clutched to her side.

Adrienne was classically beautiful. She had elegantly chiseled features, and her was long and blue-black, and encapsulated her vanity. She would toss it back over her shoulder with a casual movement of her head, like a young filly. Although she was very tall, there was a grace and fluidity in her movements that allowed her to fully capitalize on nature's gift. Her skin was pale as marble but her eyes were startling green, set in her face like emeralds on cream silk.

The nuns at the convent school prayed for her constantly.

She turned into an alleyway and stopped outside the tiny shop that belonged to the Sikh spice merchant, her senses assaulted by a miasma of cardamom, turmeric, and anise. She looked up. Above the narrow wooden stairs that led up from the street hung a small hand-painted sign:

J.K.S. Krisnan, Tailor

She pulled a scrap of paper from her purse, a note written in her father's precise hand. ‘This is the one,’ she murmured to herself. She shook the water from the umbrella and went up the stairs.

When she walked into his tiny workroom that steamy afternoon, Joginder Krisnan was bent over an ancient foot-pedal sewing machine, sewing a cotton blouse that a French captain had commissioned for his wife. He looked up and stared at her with frank admiration. His face creased

into a lazy smile that he would never have attempted in the presence of *Monsieur* Christian.

‘Can I help you. Mademoiselle?’ His voice was velvet soft, and he spoke French with a strong accent.

‘I've come to pick up a dress jacket,’ Adrienne said. ‘For *Monsieur* Emmanuel Christian.’

Joginder picked up a small leather-bound notebook from the workbench and flicked through the pages, pretending to search for the name. In fact, he remembered Emmanuel Christian very well. A grey-haired Frenchman who barked his instructions at him as if he were one of *les jaunes*. Arrogant bastard.

‘Ah, yes. *Monsieur* Christian. The white dress jacket.’

‘My father said it would be ready today.’

‘I finished it this morning,’ Joginder said. ‘Just a moment.’ He disappeared into a small back room.

Adrienne watched him. She had expected him to look like the Indian spice merchant in the shop below, with a dhoti and silk turban. But Joginder Krisnan wore western dress; white cotton trousers, an open-necked shirt, and Western shoes. He did not look like an Asian to her at all. He was . . . well, more like a Latin. He was not handsome like the French officers she had danced with at the Caravelle; he was, rather - beautiful. Yes, that was it. He had the sort of serene expression she had seen on the faces of statues in the temples. His skin was impossibly smooth and very light, the color of *café au lait*. His eyes were huge and brown, and he had delicate hands with long, tapered fingers.

He reappeared a few moments later and Adrienne resumed a look of indifference.

‘Mademoiselle?’

She turned around. He had a bulky brown-paper package in his arms. He held it out to her. His gaze was frank.

Adrienne blushed. ‘What are you looking at?’

‘I'm sorry,’ he murmured. ‘But you're the most beautiful thing I've ever seen.’ He handed her the package, allowing his fingers to touch hers. For a moment their eyes met. Adrienne stared at him in alarm, feeling naked.

She took the parcel and ran from the shop, in total confusion.

♦ ♦ ♦

‘You're quiet tonight, Adrienne.’

‘Yes, Father.’

‘What's the matter? You've hardly said a word all evening.’

‘Nothing, Father.’

Emmanuel Christian pushed his plate away and dabbed at his chin with a napkin. He was an ordered man, and he disliked any circumstance that disturbed the equilibrium of his life. It was unlike his daughter to be sullen. Indeed, he often found her eloquence a burden, especially during dinner.

He was a tall, large-boned man with iron-grey hair, the deep lines at the corners of his mouth twisted in a habitual frown. His movements were stiff, as if the years of strict self-discipline had transmuted rigidity into his very soul. He had risen through the ranks of the *Service Publique* to become Director of the Office of Information and Propaganda in Saigon. His career had reinforced in him two convictions: the importance of order, and the inherent superiority of his own culture.

Mai Ong, the ancient *boyesse*, removed his plate and disappeared into the kitchen. It was silent in the room, except for the murmur of the cicadas through the French windows and the delicate tinkle of silver on china as Adrienne pushed a morsel of chicken around her plate. Emmanuel Christian sighed, leaned back into his chair, and waited for Mai Ong to reappear with his cognac.

He loved his daughter, although he disliked being with her. He was irritated by her constant chatter and was uncomfortable with her silences. It was with some relief that he recognized that she was almost of an age when he could find her a suitable match.

Adrienne suddenly dropped the knife and fork on to her plate. It resounded in the silent room like a crashing drawer.

‘Adrienne?’

‘I feel unwell. I think I shall go to my room and lie down.’ She threw her napkin on the table and got to her feet.

Emmanuel jumped up also. ‘Shall I call the doctor?’

‘No, it's just ...’ Adrienne had an inspiration. ‘… just a woman's problem.’

‘Oh … of course . . . well, goodnight, Adrienne.’

‘Goodnight, Father.’ She kissed him lightly on the cheek and fled from the room.

♦ ♦ ♦

Adrienne closed the bedroom door behind her and allowed the tension to drain from her with a long sigh. She went to her dressing table, and removed the clips from her hair, shaking it loose about her shoulders.

‘You stupid old man,’ she murmured to her reflection, ‘you're suffocating me.’

Adrienne's bedroom overlooked the garden. Bougainvillea blossom wreathed the verandah outside her window, and she breathed in their perfume as the branches were stirred by the desultory night breeze. It was sticky hot in the room. Adrienne turned off the light, stripped off her dress and lay naked on her bed under the gently moving mosquito net. She stretched her arms above her head and groaned, softly; a tiny, animal sound. There was a deep and burning ache in her belly. She was haunted by the face of the smooth-skinned tailor she had met that afternoon.

Her fingers brushed the velvet-smooth skin along the inside of her thigh, and she thought of the whispered conversations at school and the confessions, real and imagined, that other girls had made to her. The lure of sin excited and terrified her. She tried to picture herself in bed with a man, wondered what it would feel like.

Her fantasies were teased anew each week when she danced with the young army officers *en tenue de soir* at the *aperitifs dansants* at the Saigon Royal; or when she got the chance to casually flirt with the aspiring diplomats and colonialists at the Cercle Sportif. Any one of them would have liked to have helped her fulfill her fantasies, but Emmanuel Christian was a prudent man and he let her go nowhere unescorted.

Now Joginder had provided a new and seductive twist. She imagined a darkened room littered with lotus petals and a bed of carmine silk; sitar music filtered into the room and the air was thick with incense. She lay on the bed, as she was now, her arms raised in sensual languor above her head, her hair spread like a fan across the pillow.

Joginder entered the room from behind a veil of thin, gossamer curtains, his body oiled and silk-smooth, his skin rich and brown like her father's brandy. He lay down beside her on the bed, kissing her cheeks, her neck, her lips, stroking her hair, covering her body with soft kisses.

The rest of the fantasy faded into mystery, behind the shadowy gauze of the unimaginable. As the images faded, she was left alone with the damp,

suffocating heat and a nameless longing.

She tossed and turned long into the night. She threw her pillow over her head to shut out the deafening murmur of the cicadas. It was dawn before she finally fell asleep.

‘I want you to go and see that Indian tailor for me.’

Adrienne looked up from her schoolbook. She felt the blood drain from her face. ‘Father?’

Emmanuel held out the blue velvet smoking jacket. ‘There is a tear in the lining here. And this pocket needs some work.’

‘I can mend it for you.’

‘You? You can't even sew on a button. Take it to the Indian. You can drop it on your way to school in the morning.’

‘Yes, Father,’ Adrienne murmured, and looked away, afraid the look in her eyes might betray her.

Joginder’s face blossomed into a beatific smile when he saw her walk in. ‘Bonjour, Mademoiselle Christian!’

‘My father wants this jacket repaired.’

‘Of course.’ He held up the garment and inspected the lining. ‘This is not difficult. I will have it ready for him in the morning.’

‘The pocket is torn also.’

‘I will attend to it.’ He smiled again.

She could feel her heart pounding wildly. She hesitated, even though this was her cue to leave. ‘You must be very clever,’ she heard herself saying. ‘I can't even sew a button on.’

His eyes bored into hers. ‘Perhaps I could teach you.’

‘Perhaps.’ Her voice was hoarse.

‘Perhaps when you come to collect the jacket...’

Her nerve failed her. ‘I have to go to school now,’ she stuttered and raced from the shop.

The next day Emmanuel Christian decided to collect the jacket himself. There was no reason for Adrienne to ever return.

But every day she walked past his shop on the Rue Le Loi on her way to and from the Catholic school and she would stare at the little hand-painted sign that hung above the Indian spice merchant's shop house at the end of the alley. It was an exciting game, knowing that up that dark stairway lay something sinful and forbidden. She lay awake at night teasing herself with the fantasy of what might happen were she ever to climb those stairs.

It was only a little past noon, but the streets were already steaming from the rain. Vietnamese school-girls cycled home in their white silk trousers and dice rattled in the cafes where French soldiers played at *quatre-vingt-et-un*.

As usual, Adrienne stopped at the entrance to the alleyway. She bit her lip, one shoe scuffing the dirt.

She had thought out an alibi, what she might say to her father if she ever did return once more to the tailor's. She had told herself she would never do anything, of course, it was just an entertaining little puzzle.

But now she had a story all prepared, the temptation to go in was overwhelming. All she had to find now was the courage.

She shifted the satchel on her shoulder and took a deep breath. If her father ever found out …

To hell with him, pompous old goat. She set off down the alleyway.

As usual, Joginder was at his workbench when she walked in, bent over a machine. He stared at her in frank surprise.

‘I've come for my lessons,’ she told him.

He was charming and gentle. Two or three times a week Adrienne scampered up the stairs to the tiny shop on her way home from school to spend half an hour with him working with needle and thread. She was a clumsy student but Joginder proved a patient teacher. He made no move to touch her, and Adrienne felt both relieved and disappointed.

One afternoon, they were sitting side by side at the workbench and Joginder was demonstrating his technique for double-stitching. His fingers

were nimble and practiced.

‘Here. Now you.’

‘I can't.’

‘Adrienne, you must try.’

She took the needle and bent to the task. She was aware of his hot breath on the tiny hairs at the nape of her neck. She started, piercing the tip of her index finger with the needle.

‘Oh ...’

‘You've pricked yourself.’

‘It's nothing.’

‘You're bleeding.’

Joginder took her hand in his own, as if to stroke a small and wounded bird. Then he placed her forefinger in his mouth and sucked the tiny spill of blood. He looked up at her, his huge brown eyes boring into hers.

Adrienne watched him roll her finger round his tongue, fascinated by the startling pink of his mouth against his marble-white teeth. He lowered her hand and pulled her towards him. He pressed his mouth against hers, and she felt the delicious warmth of his tongue exploring her mouth. She tried to push him away, not because she didn't want him to kiss her, but because he was hurting her. Instead, Joginder pressed himself against her even more passionately, and her stool toppled backwards on to the floor. She lay on her back on the hard wooden boards, pinned under his body.

‘Not here,’ she gasped.

Joginder picked her up and carried her into his bedroom.

The bedroom consisted of a single wooden cot on the floor between a work table and some bolts of cloth that had been stacked against the wall. He kicked the door closed behind him and threw her on the bed. His hand tore at the buttons of her silk blouse.

‘Adrienne,’ he whispered. ‘Adrienne, you're beautiful.’

He stood up, and she watched as he stepped out of his clothes. She had never seen a man naked before, and even in the half-light of the room she was shocked at the size of his erect penis. She felt sure it could never fit inside her. She wanted to run, to get out of dirty room and the strange-smelling bed, but suddenly Joginder was on top of her.

‘I will make it good for you, Adrienne,’ he whispered. ‘Very good.’ He fumbled with her skirt and pants and then he was lying between her legs and forcing himself into her.

Adrienne tried to push him away, but he was too heavy. This wasn't at all like she had imagined. She groaned, the small, desperate sound of a hunted animal, and tried to roll away but Joginder mistook her distress for passion and lunged again with his hips. Adrienne cried out.

Joginder's face was contorted, his eyes empty except for his need. His fingers were entwined in her hair, pulling her head back. She felt breathless with pain. The beautiful mystery was nothing more than a shadow play of violence and possession.

'You're hurting me,' she gasped.

'Adrienne,' Joginder grunted. 'Adrienne ...'

'Please, you're hurting me ... '

'I love you, Adrienne ...'

It had barely begun when thankfully it was over. Joginder grunted on top of her a few moments more, then stiffened and gave a small, high-pitched cry. She felt the dead weight of his body crushing her.

She managed to wriggle out from beneath him, fighting the waves of shock and pain that threatened to overwhelm her. She raised herself gingerly on one elbow.

Joginder lay quite still beside her, one arm out-stretched, the only movement the rhythmic rise and fall of his chest. There were tiny beads of perspiration on his forehead. His eyelids flickered open and he gave a low growl of satisfaction. 'That was wonderful, Adrienne.'

'I want more.'

His eyes stared up at her. 'What?'

'Do it to me again,' she whispered. She rolled her hips on top of him, and her fingernails traced the droplet of sweat that ran down his cheek. She began to move against him.

'I can't ...'

Adrienne drew her legs together so that she lay between his thighs, as if she were the man and he the woman. She raised herself on her hands and began to grind her hips in a slow, ancient rhythm. 'Yes, you can.'

'Adrienne ...'

'I want it again.'

Joginder gasped, feeling her young muscles holding him, squeezing him. As she moved, her breasts brushed against his chest. He felt himself growing hard again. 'Where did you learn this?' he said.

‘Again,’ she whispered. ‘Gently this time.’ Her mouth closed on his, hot and soft and very sweet.

♦ ♦ ♦

Emmanuel Christian removed the pince-nez from his nose and slammed shut the book on his lap. He was seated in the wing-backed chair in his library. The bookshelves were bright with leather-bound novels and reproductions of Van Gogh and Gauguin hung on the white walls behind him. He wore the blue velvet smoking jacket that Joginder had mended for him.

Adrienne put her school books on the hall stand and entered the library, crossing her hands in front of her in an effort to appear contrite.

‘You're almost two hours late.’

‘Sorry, Father. I was at the cathedral.’

Emmanuel frowned, puzzled. ‘The cathedral?’

‘I was praying for *maman*. It's ten years since she ...’

‘Yes, I remember.’ The mention of his dead wife still made him uncomfortable.

‘I promised I would light a candle for her each day this week.’

Emmanuel had not expected this. He felt his anger dissolve. ‘You should have told me. I almost had the police searching for you.’

‘I'm sorry, Father. I had no idea you would be worried.’

‘In future you must tell me if you are going to be late.’

‘Yes, Father.’

Emmanuel replaced the pince-nez on his nose and returned to his reading. ‘Very well. You may go.’ He dismissed her with a wave of his hand.

Adrienne walked from the room. It required a great effort of will; she wanted to run, dance, scream. She was no longer a little girl. She was a woman, and she was in love.

Poor Father. If he only knew!

♦ ♦ ♦

The next afternoon a pretty young French girl with sable-black hair bounded up the stairs next to the Indian spice shop. The old Sikh heard the

footsteps clumping on the wooden steps and heard laughter from upstairs. He scratched irritably and mumbled something into his beard. *Ferengi*! They were all pigs.

Joginder held Adrienne in his arms, breathing in the delicious perfume of her hair, feeling the young body strain against him. ‘I was afraid you wouldn't come,’ he murmured.

‘I ran all the way from school. Quickly! We don't have long. I'm supposed to be at the cathedral.’

‘The cathedral?’

‘I'm a good Catholic girl. Can’t you tell? Now quickly - take me to bed!’

Joginder locked the door to the shop and followed Adrienne into the back room. The green shutters were drawn, and the room was dark and hot. Adrienne already lay on his bed, naked, her legs coiled up to her waist.

Joginder could scarcely believe his good fortune.

It was a moment to savor. Not only did he get to fuck a beautiful French girl; he also got to fuck the French.

CHAPTER 2

September 1946

The Notre-Dame basilica stood in the square, opposite the Post and Telegraph Office. Unlike its Parisian namesake, it was a small, plain building built from dull red brick. Beggars thronged the steps, appealing to the Christian souls of those who came there.

One afternoon Adrienne crossed the square on her way home from the Catholic school, and, instead of entering the Rue Le Loi, walked slowly up the steps of the basilica and into the cool sanctuary of the cathedral. She stood for a long time in the nave, while her eyes grew accustomed to the gloom, then walked along the aisle and sat down at one of the pews, under the statue of the Blessed Virgin. Finally, she slipped to her knees and bowed her head.

‘Mother of God,’ she murmured, ‘please don't let this happen. I'll do anything, anything. Please take this away.’ But she knew it was hopeless. In her mind God and her father had the same face, and she knew what her father would say: 'Give up your Indian lover.’ And she wouldn't do that. Not ever.

She knelt on the hard stone for a long time, staring at the flickering glow of the candles and allowed the despair to wash over her. What could she do? Her father would never accept Joginder as a match for her. He would try to send her away. ‘Holy Mother,’ she repeated, ‘please take this thing away.’

She got to her feet and went out into the bright afternoon sun.

♦ ♦ ♦

Mai Ong opened the door for her when she got home. The old woman grinned, revealing betel-stained teeth. ‘Been at prayers again?’

Adrienne ignored her. She hated the old woman. ‘It's none of your business. Where is my father?’

‘He send message. Work late at office tonight. See, maybe okay stay longer at … cathedral.’

She knows, Adrienne thought. ‘Bring me some tea. I'll be in the garden.’

The old woman went off towards the kitchen, stooped like an old witch. Adrienne dropped her books on the hallstand and went outside. She sat on the veranda watching parrots swoop and play in the banana palms.

What was she going to do?

She still could not accept this foul trick her body had played on her. She had never considered that there might be a consequence to her illicit affair and now it was too late.

It’s no good to sit here and just let it happen, she thought. I have to do something.

She ran upstairs to her bedroom and unlocked the top drawer of her dressing table. She reached into the back of the drawer and took out her jewelry box. Inside was a small gold ring, inlaid with emeralds and amethysts. It had been her mother's.

She put the ring in her purse then went back downstairs. Mai stood at the kitchen doorway, holding a silver tray and a pot of Chinese tea. ‘Your tea,’ she said.

‘I don't want any tea,’ Adrienne shouted.

‘Where you go?’

‘Out,’ Adrienne said and then she was gone.

The following afternoon Adrienne feigned illness and left school early. But instead of going straight home she made her way to Cholon, the Chinese quarter. In her purse were five thousand piastres and an address one of her school friends had scribbled for her on a scrap of paper.

Cholon was Saigon's grotesque twin. It had once been a separate settlement, but the sprawling mass of slums had kept spreading until the borders were indistinguishable. It was said that Cholon was more Chinese than Shanghai, and at least one Hollywood mogul had chosen its streets to film a China epic.

Big-bellied children squabbled in the mud alleys, between the crumbling rows of shanties and shophouses. People ate, played cards, had their fortunes told, their teeth pulled, and even bathed on the streets.

Beggars and dogs squatted side by side in the gutters. Coolies straggled along, bowed under heavy loads.

The address Adrienne had been given was on the Su Van Hahn, near the racecourse. It overlooked a crowded alley, where hollow-ribbed dogs sniffed among the piles of rubbish. Adrienne wrinkled her nose in disgust at the pervading stench of rotting fruit and the sour taint of the near-by fish market.

The crumbling shophouse was filled with long rows of earthenware jars. There was the dank, fetid smell of things long dead. Adrienne shuddered. The desiccated carcasses of bats and snakes lay piled on a wooden counter.

The *bac si* was an ancient Tonkin Chinese with sparse grey hair and huge, betel-stained teeth, like old tombstones. Her face was as wrinkled and brown as a monkey's. She wore dirty blue pajamas.

She looked up from a small table where she was crushing strange roots in a mortar and pestle. ‘What do you want?’ she shrieked in French.

‘I … I … need help,’ Adrienne stammered.

She got up and came over. As the old woman got closer Adrienne saw that she had only one eye. The other was blinded with disease, the eyeball covered with the yellow-opaque membrane of a cataract. The old woman turned her face to regard her out of her one good eye.

‘I … I'm pregnant,’ Adrienne said.

The old woman slapped her on the stomach. ‘Baby? Yes?’ She pointed. ‘Baby?’

‘Yes.’ She took a deep breath. ‘I want to get rid of it.’

‘Bad joss for you, Missee,’ the old woman said. She held out her hand. ‘Money?’

Adrienne took out her purse and showed her the five thousand piastres.

‘Where you get this much money?’

‘I sold a ring.’

The old woman shook her head and muttered something in Cantonese. ‘You wait,’ she said and scuttled off into the gloom at the back of the shop. When she reappeared, she had a cracked china cup in her hands. She proffered it to Adrienne as if it were a chalice. ‘Drink,’ she ordered.

Adrienne took the cup. The liquid was brown-black and smelled of the grave. ‘Drink,’ the old woman repeated.

For a moment Adrienne held the cup to her lips, her stomach revolting at the stench of the potion and the knowledge of what she was about to do.

This is a mortal sin, she heard the Mother Superior whisper. There can be no absolution for this.

‘Drink!’

‘No!’ She threw the cup on the floor. It shattered, spraying the liquid over the old woman's legs. Adrienne turned and fled from the shop, the enraged shrieks of the harridan ringing in her ears.

♦ ♦ ♦

Joginder leapt to his feet when he heard the familiar footfall on the stairs. He stood beside his workbench and waited. ‘My little lotus ...’ he said. He took her in his arms, but she did not respond. ‘Where have you been? I haven't seen you for almost a week.’

‘Just hold me, Jogi.’

Her face was as pale as alabaster. ‘What's wrong?’

‘I'm pregnant.’

‘What?’

She pulled away so she could look into his face. ‘I'm going to have a baby. Your baby.’

Joginder forced a smile. ‘That's wonderful.’

She searched his eyes. ‘Is it?’

‘Of course it is. I love you.’

‘Will you marry me?’

‘Of course.’ Her father would never allow it!

Adrienne threw her arms around his neck and hugged him. ‘Jogi, I'm frightened.’

‘It's all right,’ he crooned. ‘Everything's all right.’

‘I love you, Jogi.’

Joginder pulled her closer, aroused. He had thought of nothing else but her all week. This was bad news, but he didn’t have to do anything about it now. They had time. He had time. ‘Stay,’ he whispered.

‘Just hold me,’ she said.

‘All right.’ Joginder lied and locked the door. He led her to the tiny back room, and his narrow, wooden cot. As soon as they were inside he began to tear off his clothes.

‘Do you love me?’ Adrienne asked him.

‘I've never loved anything more.’

‘You want this baby, don't you?’

Joginder unbuttoned her blouse. She did not try to resist him. ‘Yes, my darling, yes,’ he whispered and pushed her back on to the bed.

Downstairs Kamil Singh sat on a stool inside his shop, the metal shutters rolled down against the flattening heat of the afternoon. His somber grey eyes rolled upwards as he heard the bare boards of his ceiling begin to creak once more. For almost a week the afternoons had been quiet. Now the girl had come back. *Ferengi!*

He went to the doorway and spat into the street.

♦ ♦ ♦

Emmanuel Christian sat in his library, a leather-bound volume open on his lap. Adrienne hovered in the doorway, watching him. The soft light of the reading lamp accentuated the strands of silver in his neatly combed hair.

‘Father . . .?’

Emmanuel sighed, a long, pained breath. ‘What is it, child?’

‘I need to talk to you.’

He slammed the book shut. ‘All right. What's troubling you?’

She had been steeling herself for this moment all day and now it had come she did not know if she could go through with it. How would he react? She did not remember seeing him betray any emotion since the day her mother died ten years before.

Her hands were clenched so tight she felt her fingernails biting into her palms. ‘Father, I'm ...’ The words stuck in her throat.

Emmanuel watched her, his jaw set in a grim line.

‘Adrienne, just say it.’

‘I need your help.’

‘What is it? School?’

She shook her head. ‘No, not school.’

‘Well, come on, child. Out with it!’

She felt tears coursing down her cheeks, they were hot and made her eyes sting. ‘I'm going to have a baby!’

She had expected fury; she had prayed that by some miracle he might try to comfort her. She had imagined the many ways he might react, but she

was unprepared for no reaction at all.

Emmanuel Christian sat there unmoving and waited until her tears were gone. When Adrienne looked up again, his face had set like stone.

‘Say something!’ she screamed at him.

He rose from his chair, went to the sideboard and poured himself a brandy from a crystal decanter. For a long time, the only movement in the room was the swirling of the thick amber liquid around the brandy balloon.

Finally: ‘Who is it?’

‘His name is . . . Joginder.’

‘Joginder? You mean . . .?’

‘He lives on the ... ‘

‘A native? You've been sleeping with one of *les jaunes?*’ He dropped the glass on the cedar floor and took two steps towards her, his hand raised. For a moment she thought he was going to hit her. Her father had never struck her, never.

‘He's not Vietnamese. He's Indian. And I love him!’

‘Love? You don't even know what the word means! How long has this been going on *mam'selle?*’

‘Ever since I fetched the jacket ...’

‘The jacket? He … he's a tailor?’ He grabbed a fistful of her hair and threw her to the floor. ‘You slut! You stupid, ungrateful little slut!’

Adrienne stared up at him. A knotted vein bulged at his temple. It was the first time she had ever seen him lose control and she felt a delicious thrill of triumph. She had finally shaken the old bastard out of his indifference.

‘I love him!’

‘You little fool! You're French! You're a white woman! You don't sleep with coolies!’

‘But I love him!’ she screamed again.

‘You shameless little whore! You're just like your mother!’

There was a long silence in the room. Emmanuel realized, too late, what he had said.

‘Father …?’

‘Get out,’ he hissed at her. ‘Go to your room.’

‘What did you mean ...’

‘Get out!’

Adrienne scrambled to her feet. Her knees were trembling. She looked back once before fleeing from the room, just in time to see her father take the photograph of himself and her mother from the sideboard and throw it with all his force at the wall.

♦ ♦ ♦

The next morning, it was as if nothing had happened.

Emmanuel sat on the veranda, under the heavy wreaths of red and purple bougainvillea. The hot morning sun filtered through the leaves of the tamarind trees, the garden was vivid with the last of the *flamboyants*. The teak table was covered with a starched white linen tablecloth. Emmanuel sat in a deckchair against the wall, eating one of the croissants he had Mai Ong buy fresh each day from the Givral. He wore a crisp white tropical suit and his pith helmet lay on the table beside the silver coffee pot.

He was reading a week-old copy of *Le Figaro*.

Adrienne sat down in the other chair and waited as Mai Ong filled her cup with steaming black coffee. She looked up at the sky. Towering walls of cotton-wool cloud were billowing over the ocean, blanketing the pale washed blue of the sky. She heard a roll of thunder in the far distance, although the sun still hung in a clear sky to the east.

‘Don't you want any breakfast?’ Emmanuel asked her.

‘I'm not hungry.’

Emmanuel removed his spectacles and leaned back in his chair. ‘I am sending you back to France,’ he said.

‘France?’

‘I will arrange for the baby to be adopted. Everyone will think you have gone back for a holiday. Afterwards you may return and it will be as if nothing had happened.’

‘I don't want to go back to France.’

‘You should have thought of that before. You have made your bed and now you must lie in it.’

‘Why must I go back to France?’

‘I would have thought that was obvious. Do you wish to shame me in front of everyone in Saigon?’

‘Is that all you can think of?’

‘Even if you do not consider your good name is worth anything, I do. You will have the baby in France and I will arrange to have it adopted.’

‘I won't do it.’

‘If you wish to remain my daughter, you will do precisely as I say.’

‘I want to marry Joginder.’

Emmanuel took the fob watch from his waistcoat and glanced quickly at it. Then he leaned forward and drained his coffee cup. ‘I will make the arrangements this morning. There is a boat leaving for Marseilles next week.’

Adrienne had never openly defied her father before. But she wouldn't let him do this to her; she loved Joginder, and she didn't care what color his skin was. She loved him, and he loved her; together they would overcome the petty prejudices of men like her father. ‘I won't go.’

Emmanuel's icy control began to slip away. He picked up his newspaper and slammed it down on the table, spilling his coffee on the virginal white cloth. ‘I will not allow this madness to continue a moment longer! You will remain in this house until it is time for you to leave. I forbid you to see this . . . native . . . again!’

‘I want to marry him.’

‘And live the rest of your life in one stinking little room?’

‘Jogi will be a rich man one day. He has plans. He is going to have shops in Hong Kong and Bombay and ...’

‘Nonsense! He's just a filthy darkie and that's what he'll always be!’

‘I intend to marry him,’ Adrienne repeated.

‘Then marry him! But if you leave this house, you may never come back. I will forget that I ever had a daughter!’

Adrienne got to her feet, drawing back her shoulders. ‘Very well. And I will forget I ever had a father.’ And she added: ‘It shouldn't be too difficult.’

Emmanuel watched her go, his fists clenched in impotent fury. Mon Dieu, but she was like her mother! Such pride. And a slut too. It was in the blood. Well, let her protest about love all she wants, he thought. This time next week she will be on a boat for France. He would not have her make him a laughing stock, like her mother had. She might scream and shout but in the end she would not give up her fine home to live in squalor with that Indian coolie and his sewing machines.

♦ ♦ ♦

Joginder was at his workbench by the window, bent over the seams of a new jacket. When he heard footfall on the worn wooden steps he looked up, assuming the obsequious smile he reserved for his customers.

When he saw that it was Adrienne, his grin fell away. What was she doing here at this hour of the day?

‘Adrienne?’

She settled her brown leather suitcase on the floor. ‘Jogi,’ she whispered. ‘I need your help.’

He stood up and came towards her. ‘Have you told your father about ...’

‘He threw me out,’ Adrienne lied. In fact, he did not yet know she was gone.

Joginder had expected that, of course. ‘Perhaps he will change his mind when he sees how much you … how much we love each other.’

‘Who cares? We don't need him, Jogi. We have each other.’

Joginder took her in his arms, so that she could not see the relief on his face. They could not marry, of course. But he did not want it to end, not yet. One day he would have to give up her perfect white body. But not yet. It was just a question of how long he could play out the game.

Later that night, as they lay in bed, Adrienne whispered: ‘You do love me, don’t you, Jogi?’

‘Of course. With my life.’

‘And you will marry me?’

‘Yes,’ he lied. ‘Yes, we'll get married. Soon.’

Adrienne twisted around, leaning on one elbow. He could feel her eyes trying to pierce the darkness, read his face. ‘When?’

‘I'm just a poor tailor. You are used to much more than I can give you right now.’

‘It doesn't matter,’ she said, and the childish earnestness of her voice annoyed him. ‘We love each other. That's the important thing.’

‘Even a poor tailor has his pride. Your father will think I married you for other reasons.’

‘To hell with him.’

‘Be patient, Adrienne. Please.’

He felt her lips brush his cheek. ‘You promise?’

‘I promise.’

May 1947

The night Michel was born a storm swept across the city from the China Sea.

Adrienne arched her back as another contraction racked her, her screams drowned by the rolling of thunder overhead. She had long ago surrendered her humanity to the pain. The world had become a surreal, nightmare place of unrelenting agony. For two days she had labored behind a bamboo screen, bathed in her own sweat, trying to push the child from her body. But the child would not come, and Adrienne wanted only to die.

Her cries brought one of the nuns, her pinched face swimming in front of Adrienne's eyes, illuminated by a fierce crackle of lightning. The storm was directly above them. Something moved on the roof.

‘This is God’s judgment on you. You must pray for his forgiveness.’ The Sisters all made a point of finding out which of the girls did not have proper fathers for their children. It was their consolation for being kind to sinners.

‘Please ...’ Adrienne gasped, ‘please ... do something ...’

‘It is God's will,’ the sister shouted at her over the roar of the storm, though she knew that if a good doctor had been present he might have helped her. But this was a charity ward and there were few enough doctors even for the good hospitals.

The spasm passed, and Adrienne gulped a mouthful of air. There was no escape. The baby was a monster and it was slowly killing her.

Other brown-skinned girls had come and gone, had endured the taunts of the Caritas nuns and now had their babies bundled in their arms somewhere. She wished she could trade places with the fifteen-year-old Meo girl, the mistress of a young artillery officer, who was already on her way back to a comfortable apartment near the Saigon river, with a servant to bring her cool drinks and cigarettes and a wet nurse to look after her coffee colored infant.

Instead she had been forty hours straining and screaming in this stinking charity ward. She didn’t care about the baby any more. She just wanted to be free of the terrible pain.

She felt the onset of another contraction. She stuffed a mouthful of her long hair into her mouth and bit down.

‘Pray God for forgiveness,’ she heard the nun say, and then she was gone and Adrienne was left alone with her agony and the desolate sound of the rain beating against the window. She sunk her nails into the flesh of her thighs as she bore down.

It felt like the child was tearing her apart. She screamed herself hoarse and cursed the child and the man whose seed it was.

♦ ♦ ♦

The boy was a mirror image of his father. He had the same *cafe au lait* complexion, with chocolate-brown eyes and a down of black hair. When she put him to her breast he stared back at her the whole time, greedy for her attention and her love.

Adrienne preferred to look at the wall. Just leave me alone, she thought. I want Jogi, I don't want you. Not now. Just leave me alone.

‘What's wrong, child?’ *Soeur* Odile was different from the other sisters. She was a kindly old woman with florid cheeks and horn-rimmed spectacles.

Adrienne wiped away the tears that smeared her cheeks. ‘Nothing is wrong. I just need to rest.’

‘Every infant is a gift from God, you know.’

Adrienne wanted to laugh in her face. But when she looked into the old nun's eyes, she knew she meant it. ‘There are other gifts I would have liked better.’

Odile patted her hand. ‘You are fretting. It is not just the baby, is it?’

Adrienne had seen young men visiting some of the other girls, smiling at their babies, bringing flowers and chocolate. Where was Joginder?

‘Has there been anyone asking for me? An Indian . . . he's tall . . . you couldn't forget him if you saw him. He is very handsome.’

Odile shook her head. The sad eyes looked owlish behind the thick lenses of her spectacles. ‘So that's what it is ... ‘

‘His name is Joginder. Joginder Krisnan.’

‘No one has been here looking for you, my child. I am sorry.’

Adrienne gripped the nun's hand. ‘Can you do something for me?’

‘If I can.’

‘He has a tailor's shop, near the main square. It's not far.’

‘You want me to go there?’

‘Would you? Please. It’s not far.’

Odile sighed. ‘Very well. I'll see if I can get away later this afternoon. Now you must rest. You have to regain your strength.’

‘Thank you. Thank you so much.’

♦ ♦ ♦

It was evening when *Soeur* Odile returned. She stood by the bed and picked up Adrienne's hand.

Adrienne saw genuine regret in the old nun's face. ‘I'm sorry,’ she said. ‘I spoke to him. But he says he cannot come at the moment. He is too busy.’

Adrienne nodded and turned her face to the wall.

CHAPTER 3

November 1951

Saigon had once been described as a quiet French village nestling on the banks of the Mekong River. Now its streets bristled with barbed wire and machine guns.

As the war in Tonkin dragged on, a campaign of terror was taking place against the colonial French. French-owned buildings were bombed and bloated corpses began to appear in the river. Grenades were thrown into cafés and into cinemas, and each night, after the curfew, mortar fire from the surrounding hills crunched into the suburbs.

In the French quarter they barricaded the doors and windows of their villas and settled to a life under siege.

Each day there was news of some fresh atrocity. A French major staying at the Saigon Royal hired a Vietnamese barber to shave him in his room. Unfortunately for the major the barber was a Viet Minh agent. The man took the opportunity to draw the cold razor across the officer's throat.

When the proprietor ran into the room he found the major gurgling and flapping on the floor like a beached fish, surrounded by a widening pool of his own blood.

The French would not admit, even to themselves, that they were losing their war, but each year the French Expeditionary Forces lost more officers in Indochina than graduated from their military academy at St Cyr.

Against this background of bloodshed and bombings, another smaller, more personal war was reaching its inevitable conclusion.

♦ ♦ ♦

Adrienne lay on the narrow bed, staring at the flaking paint of the ceiling, its patterns forming grotesque shapes in the shadowy darkness. The fan creaked overhead, almost useless in the damp, thick air. The room was suffocatingly hot, even with the shutters thrown wide open, and the sheets were damp with sweat.

Michel gave a small cry, restless in his cot in the corner.

It was past midnight. Joginder finally turned off the lamp in the workshop and crept in. She watched his silhouette against the shuttered window, as he took off his clothes. He was running to fat. Too many long hours at the workbench. And there was a glistening brown patch on his scalp where his hair had begun to thin.

Business was flourishing though there still never seemed to be enough money. Joginder had taught Adrienne to sew buttonholes and measure seams, and now he employed another seamstress at the shop, a smooth-skinned almond-eyed Vietnamese girl. One day, he promised her, he would be a rich man. It was the only fragment of the dream that had survived.

She wondered when they had stopped loving each other, or if Joginder had ever truly loved her at all. As soon as her belly had begun to swell, he had seemed to lose interest in her.

For a while, after Michel's birth, she thought they had rediscovered the spark. But he had never shown any interest in his son and as Michel grew Joginder became more distant. She tried to tell herself it was because he was working so hard, but deep in her heart she knew the terrible mistake she had made. She stayed now out of stubborn pride. She could not bring herself to go back to her father, beg his forgiveness and ask his help.

She would not do it.

She sniffed the gamey taint of sweat as Joginder slipped into the bed beside her. She felt besieged by her own loneliness. She ached for someone to hold her and love her. It had been so long.

‘Jogi...’

‘I'm tired.’

Adrienne reached under the bedclothes, found the soft flesh of his penis, rubbed herself against him. ‘Please, Jogi.’

He pushed her away. ‘I told you, I'm tired.’

Adrienne rolled away, stung by the rejection. ‘You work too hard.’

‘A man has to work hard if he's going to succeed.’

‘You're ruining your health.’

He didn’t answer her, and she thought that he had fallen asleep. But then he said: ‘Yes, that’s what I've been wanting to tell you.’

‘Tell me . . .?’

‘I've decided to take a holiday.’

‘A holiday?’

‘I've bought a ticket on a ship going to Bombay next week. I want to visit my family. I haven't seen them for nearly six years.’

‘What about me?’

‘I need you to stay here and look after the shop.’

She felt suddenly numb. ‘I want to come with you.’

‘The voyage will be too difficult. Besides, I cannot close the shop. You are the only one I can trust.’

‘But … how long will you be gone?’

‘A month. Perhaps two.’

‘Please let me come with you.’

‘I told you, it's impossible. Now go to sleep.’

‘But you've always said you should like me to meet your family. You said that when we get married ...’

‘Go to sleep! We'll talk about it in the morning.’

‘But Jogi ...’

‘Not now.!’ Joginder repeated. ‘In the morning.’

He rolled away from her.

Adrienne lay awake for hours, listening to the creak- creak-creak of the fan overhead. She threw back the single sheet in despair. She thought of her bedroom on the Rue Catinat, the crisp cotton sheets, the smell of the bougainvillea blossom that wreathed the verandah outside her window. She cursed herself for trading all that for this narrow bed, for poverty and damp and an uncaring Indian husband.

What had she done?

‘Do you still love me, Jogi?’ she whispered to the darkness.

Adrienne did not expect him to answer. He was asleep. Or perhaps he was only pretending to be. Either way, she supposed she already knew the answer.

Adrienne stared into the darkness until the sound of the bells from the Notre-Dame basilica drifted across the city, summoning the faithful to the six-o'clock Mass, their ringing slowly drowned out by the mounting cacophony of bicycle bells and *cyclopousses* on the Rue Le Loi.

As she finally closed her eyes she remembered the words her father had said to her: ‘You have made your bed. Now you must lie in it.’

♦ ♦ ♦

Joginder had been away for almost two weeks when Adrienne finally made up her mind. She awoke early that morning, before the Vietnamese girl, Sai, had arrived at the shop for the day, and bathed. She stood naked in the tiny white-tiled washroom and splashed cold water over her head with the long-handled dipper.

Afterwards she stood in front of the cracked mirror and examined her reflection critically. She was twenty-three now; her beauty was at its peak. She was not as taut or as supple as she had been before Michel, but she knew she was still a desirable woman. She could still turn men's heads in the street.

But these last few years with Joginder had hollowed her cheeks and there were tiny lines etched around her eyes already. She could not afford to waste any more time on an Indian tailor. Her beauty could be thrown away on a hollow passion, as it had with Joginder, or it could be her passport back to the life of ease and luxury she had so recklessly surrendered. What a fool she had been. Her romantic daring had been nothing more than a schoolgirl’s fantasy after all. *Folle, folle!* She had thrown away a life of privilege for these two shabby, stinking rooms.

Well it was time to put her pride away.

She put on the pale green gingham frock she had last worn the day she had come to live with Joginder and splashed some Joie perfume behind her ears. Then she went to the iron cot in the corner to dress Michel in his best clothes.

The boy's resemblance to his father was startling. Even after four years she could still scarcely believe the child was her own. The rich brown skin and the chocolate-brown eyes still shocked her. It was difficult to believe he had once been a part of her own body.

Two brown arms reached out eagerly towards her. ‘Come on, little Michel,’ she whispered. ‘*Maman* is not going to work today. You and I are going out.’

‘Where are we going?’ the child murmured sleepily.

‘We are going to visit someone very special. You must promise to be on your best behavior.’

‘Who is it?’ he asked eagerly.

‘Promise me you'll be good. You mustn't shout or scream, and you must remember the manners I taught you. Do you promise?’

‘Yes, *maman*. But where are we going?’

Adrienne dressed her son in a white cotton shirt and blue shorts. ‘We are going to meet your grandfather,’ she told him.

♦ ♦ ♦

Adrienne had passed her father's villa on the Rue Catinat every day for the past four years on her way to the market. Sometimes she saw a shadow move behind one of the windows and wondered if her father was watching her. Twice she had passed him on the street and he had not spoken to her, or even looked in her direction. She had thought of grabbing him by the shoulders, making him face her, but her pride would not allow it.

Now, as she walked up the long drive between the banana palms, she wondered what he would do. The neat gardens were rimmed with the pale orange and yellow tiger flowers. She stood on the familiar porte-cochere, wreathed in red and purple bougainvillea, and took a deep breath to steady her nerves.

‘Shoulders back,’ she hissed at Michel. The boy thrust out his chest and gripped her hand tighter.

She set down her battered brown suitcase and rang the bell. She waited.

Mai Ong opened the door. When she saw her the crone's face twisted into a malicious grin. ‘So, missy, you come back?’

Adrienne drew herself up to her full height. ‘Tell my father I'm here.’

The *boyesse* looked down at Michel. ‘This belong you now?’

Adrienne took a step forward. She wanted to hit her. ‘Just tell my father I'm here. Do it!’

‘You still damn fine manners.’ She turned and tottered across the marble-floored hallway. ‘You wait. Master on verandah, breakfast time. Maybe he not want to see you.’

So it's come to this, Adrienne thought. Begging the help for an interview with my own father. Treated like a tramp, which is what everyone thinks I am.

She peered inside, trying to remember. The door to the library was open, and she could see her father’s favorite wing-back chair, the shelves of leather-bound history books. It was cool inside, and the house had an almost cathedral sanctity. She suddenly missed it all so much, she could hardly breathe. She fought back tears of self-pity.

‘So. You've come back.’

Emmanuel stood in the doorway, his hands clasped behind his back. He wore a crisply starched white tropical suit, his silver-grey hair meticulously parted. He looked at her down the length of his nose.

‘I won't beg,’ Adrienne said. ‘I'll starve first.’

‘I see your experience of the seamier side of life hasn't changed you.’

‘You mean it hasn't made me servile?’

‘I meant grateful’

God, I had forgotten how much I detest you! Adrienne thought. Just one smile, one moment of gentleness and I would have dissolved in tears at your feet. ‘What do you want from me?’ she said.

‘It was you who came to me,’ he reminded her and switched his attention to the coffee-skinned child at her feet. He frowned. ‘Is this your brat?’

‘His name is Michel.’

‘It's a French name. The child is obviously not.’ He looked back at Adrienne. ‘Have you finally come to your senses, then?’

The bastard! He was going to make her say it. She nodded. ‘I want to come back.’

‘Very well. Not the child, though.’

‘But. . . what do you mean?’

‘He's a darkie. You cannot bring him into this house.’

Adrienne tightened her grip on Michel's hand. ‘I . . . I'm his mother.’

‘That’s right. That is why I will never allow him to remain in my house as a reminder of your shame.’

‘But Father ...’

‘You can come back, Adrienne. But you must leave the child behind.’

Adrienne wanted to protest but no words would come. It had never occurred to her that her father would make such a demand of her.

She couldn't do it. Michel was her blood. She picked up her suitcase. ‘As you wish, Papa.’ She dragged Michel away. ‘Allons-y!’

‘Adrienne!’

She turned, hoping that he was about to relent. But the expression on his face crushed that false hope. ‘When you have had enough, give the urchin to the orphanage and then you can come home.’

Adrienne hurried away, heard the door slam behind her. She hurried away, clutching Michel's hand, the little boy scampering to keep up.

♦ ♦ ♦

Sai was bent over the foot-pedal Singer when Adrienne got back to the shop. ‘You have been crying,’ she said.

‘It's nothing.’

Her pretty oval face twisted into a frown. ‘Joginder should have taken you with him.’

Something in the girl's tone alarmed her. She's goading me, Adrienne thought. She wants me to leave. ‘It's none of your business what Mr. Krisnan wishes to do. Get on with your work.’

Sai pouted at her. Adrienne went into the tiny bedroom and closed the door behind her. She dropped her case on the floor and threw herself down on the bed. She slammed both her fists into her pillow. ‘Damn you! Damn you, damn you, DAMN YOU!’

‘*Maman?*’ Michel's fingers stroked her hair.

‘That cold, bloody bastard!’

‘*Maman*, what is wrong?’ Michel stood beside the bed, his huge brown eyes were wide in astonishment. ‘Why are you crying?’

What am I going to do with this child? Adrienne thought. He has no legal father, no nationality, no existence outside the handwritten entry in the records of the Catholic hospital. She pulled him close, felt the beat of his heart against her cheek.

‘What am I going to do with you?’ she said aloud.

There was a knock on the door. It inched opened. Adrienne sat up. It was Sai.

‘What are you doing in here? Get back to your work!’

‘I heard you crying.’

‘Just go away!’

But Sai just stood there. ‘I have to talk to you,’ she said.

‘Get out!’

‘It's about Joginder.’

‘Jogi? What about him?’

‘You know what he's doing, don't you? He has a wife in Bombay. That's why he went back. That's his family.’

A wife? Joginder?’ What was she talking about?

‘He told me about her. Her name is Sushila.’

‘He told you? Why should he tell you anything?’

Sai did not answer. But as Adrienne stared at the pretty brown face and the soft willowy figure and thought about the long hours when she was away every day at the markets and she started to understand. ‘Just get out.’

‘I just want to help you, mademoiselle.’

‘I’m sure you do.’

Sai shrugged her shoulders and left the room. A few moments later the sewing machine clattered back to life in the shop. Adrienne stared at the flaking plaster of the walls, saw her father's face in the grim patterns. He was smiling.

♦ ♦ ♦

Two weeks later Joginder returned. He got back late one night and slipped silently into bed beside her. A few minutes later, he was snoring. The next morning he got up at dawn and went back to work in the shop without a word.

Adrienne slipped into her faded green frock and came to stand beside him at the workbench. ‘Jogi.’

He lifted his eyes from the half-finished shirt on the table and put down his needle and thread. ‘My little lotus. Do you have a kiss for your husband?’

‘No.’

He shrugged. ‘Are you still angry with me?’

‘I want to know if you have a wife.’

‘Now where did you get that idea?’

‘From Sai.’

‘She's been talking to you while I've been away, has she?’ He reached for her hand. ‘We'll talk about it later. How about a welcoming home for your husband?’

Adrienne pushed his arm away. ‘I want to know the truth.’.

Joginder sighed. ‘Of course I have a wife. We were married in India when I was thirteen years old.’

‘You bastard,’ she hissed. How she would have liked to crush that grinning, smug face with her fist. ‘Why didn't you tell me?’

‘Why? Because it doesn't matter.’

‘Doesn't matter? When you have denied me marriage all these years?’

‘It was arranged by my family. I don't love her. She's fat and she has a sharp tongue.’

‘Then why don't you divorce her?’

‘I can't.’

Adrienne suddenly understood why there had never been any money; he had been sending it all back to India. ‘But . . . but you said you loved me.’

‘I do love you. But I have my sons to think of.’

She heard a small cry and realized it had come from her. This was all a cruel and hideous joke. ‘Your sons?’

‘Of course. I told you, we were thirteen when we were married. She wasn't so fat then.’

‘You pig.’

His face underwent a change. When he spoke again his voice was quiet. ‘Do not ever speak to me that way again.’

‘You knew you couldn't ever marry me. And you wouldn't tell me! You let me make a fool of myself!’

‘Of course I couldn't marry you! Didn't you realize that, you little idiot! You are not Hindu! My religion forbids it!’

For a moment Adrienne was too stunned to answer. She had sacrificed everything for him, turned her back on her own prejudices, to be with him. She had lowered herself! Now he was telling her he thought she wasn’t good enough?

‘You ignorant coolie,’ she hissed. ‘What have you done to me?’

Joginder jumped to his feet and smashed his right hand into Adrienne's face.

She hurtled backwards across the floor. She blacked out for a moment. When she opened her eyes Joginder stood over her, his face contorted with rage. ‘Don’t you ever call me that, you little French whore!’ He hit her again, with the back of his hand. She tasted her own blood in her mouth.

Adrienne scrambled to her feet. Her fingers closed around a pair of scissors on the workbench. He reached for her, but he was too slow. She swung at him, the point of the scissors arcing towards his face. She wanted to rip that gloating smile off his face forever.

His brought his arm up to protect himself and her hand struck his forearm, knocking the scissors out of her grasp. They clattered out of sight under the workbench.

Joginder grabbed her, forcing her hand behind her back, twisting it between her own shoulder blades. ‘You little bitch!’ he hissed. ‘I'll teach you a lesson!’ He dragged her towards the bedroom.

‘Get your hands off me!’ She managed to twist away for a moment, but then he hit her again, a savage blow that put her on her knees. He threw her face-down on the bed, pulled up her nightgown and tore off the cotton pants she wore underneath.

‘Don't,’ she moaned.

He pinned her with his own weight. ‘This is what you wanted, isn't it?’ he whispered in her ear. ‘A black lover?’ He twisted his fingers in her hair and forced her head back. She felt herself gagging, choking for breath. There was a sharp, terrible agony as he forced himself inside her. She clawed at the sheets and tried to roll away from him, but he pulled her head further back until she begged him to stop.

As he pounded at her, she thought about her father's library, the drifting aroma of his Havana cigars, summer birds in the garden among the yellow tiger flowers, the smell of fresh-ground coffee and the feel of soft white muslin skirts.

Suddenly Joginder ground his hips into her and gave a dry scream. He collapsed, panting, on top of her. Adrienne heard someone screaming, realized it was Michel, watching the whole thing from his cot. She reached out a hand to try and comfort him, but it was Sai who hurried into the room to pick him up and try and gentle him. Her face was creased into a secret smile. Adrienne’s humiliation was complete.

CHAPTER 4

Michel stood up in his cot and watched his mother step naked from the bed. His large solemn eyes followed her to the tiny dressing table in the corner. Michel adored his mother. He loved watching her dress, loved the strange, magic smell of her. She was the only beautiful thing in the whole world.

Sometimes, at night, he watched her sleeping next to his father; her, perfect and marble white next to his mahogany-colored skin. Yesterday he had hurt her again. He remembered the obscene, grunting noises and his mother's face, turned towards him, her eyes tight shut, her lips working in a silent scream. Once before, he had cried out in the middle of it and they had stopped so he tried hard every night from then on to stay awake and protect her from him. His father had not hurt his mother for a long time now. Until yesterday; then he had screamed and screamed, and it had done no good.

How he hated him.

But now they were alone. Joginder had gone to the temple to pray to Ganesh, as he did every Sunday morning. The sun had still not risen, and the sky was stained a smoky violet. It was already oppressively hot. A droplet of perspiration trickled between his mother's breasts.

He watched contentedly as she combed out the long silky hair that fell around her bare shoulders. She slipped on her green frock and threw some clothes into a battered brown suitcase.

‘Where are we going, *maman?*’

‘Michel! I didn't know you were awake.’

‘Are we going to visit grandfather again?’

Not today. ‘I have to go out for a little while.’

‘Can I come with you?’

‘You stay here. Be good for your *maman*, please.’

Michel felt a stab of panic. ‘You're crying.’

She bent down next to his cot. ‘I have to go away for just a little while. You'll be all right here. Your father will take good care of you.’

Going away? Going away without me. What can she mean? How could she say such a thing? He stared at her, in shock. He knew he had to somehow stop her, but he was trapped by the iron bars of the cot.

He panicked. ‘No, *maman!* No!’

Adrienne snatched up her suitcase and hurried to the door. ‘Please, little Michel, please ...’ Her face was wet with tears. He could not believe this was happening. The only beautiful thing in the world was leaving him?

Her face was screwed up tight, his wonderful goddess suddenly looked like a monkey. What was happening?

‘NO!!’

For a moment Adrienne stood in the doorway, her face twisted in agony, a look he would remember for the rest of his life. For a moment he thought she was going to come back for him and he held out his arms and screamed. Then suddenly the door slammed shut and her spiked heels clattered down the wooden stairs and into the alley, his own shrieks of despair echoing in the tiny room long after she was gone.

♦ ♦ ♦

When Joginder returned from his devotions later that morning, he could hear the screams from the street. The fat Sikh merchant was rolling up the iron shutters of his shophouse. ‘Your little brat's been screaming like that all morning,’ he grunted.

‘I'll see to it, I'll see to it,’ Joginder said. He ran up the wooden steps to the shop.

Sai was at her place at the workbench, bent over the foot-pedal Singer machine.

‘What's going on?’ Joginder said to her. ‘What's that row?’

‘I tried to gentle him. He won’t let me near him. He bit me,’ she said and showed the angry red mark on her arm.

‘Where is Adrienne?’

‘She's gone.’

‘Gone where?’

‘I saw her on the stairs when I got here this morning. She had her suitcase. She said to tell you … she said to tell you that she was never coming back.’

Joginder threw open the bedroom door. Michel was standing up in the iron-framed cot, his face flushed beet-red from his screaming. There was snot everywhere. His eyes were wild, like an animal’s. When he saw Joginder he threw himself backwards and banged his head against the bars, over and over.

‘Shut up!’ Joginder shouted at him. ‘SHUT UP!’

Michel kept screaming and banging his head so Joginder ran across the room and slapped the boy as hard as he could with the flat of his hand. It only silenced him for a moment. Then he started howling again.

‘She's gone back to her father,’ Sai said.

Joginder whirled around. ‘Why didn't you try to stop her?’

‘It was what we wanted?’

‘It was what you wanted!’ Adrienne! The bitch! She'd abandoned him with her little brat! Well, if she thought he was going to take care of him, she was very wrong.

‘What are you going to do?’ Sai asked him

Joginder's nose wrinkled in disgust. The boy had soiled his pajamas. ‘Get him out of here!’

‘And take him where?’

‘I don't care what you do with him. Just get him out of here.’

‘You mean, the orphanage?’

‘If you like. Or you can just throw him in the street. Just get rid of him!’

Later that morning, after the boy was gone, Joginder's good humor returned. He felt as if a huge burden had been lifted from his shoulders. He whispered some prayers of thanks to the picture of Ganesh that hung on the wall over his workbench and lit incense beneath the image as a sacrifice as a token of his appreciation.

December 1951

It was Sunday afternoon and the heat hung in a misty haze. The peal of the cathedral bells drifted across Saigon. Adrienne and her father sat under the slow fans on the terrace of the Continental Hotel, looking over the Rue Catinat, its broad tamarind-shaded streets crowded with trundling *cyclopousses* and horse-drawn traps, the clatter of horses’ hooves drowning the cries of the street hawkers. In the far distance the grey sprawl of the city melted into the limpid indigo of the sea.

Adrienne sipped her vin blanc, ignoring the stares in her direction from around the restaurant. The French colony, like every bastion of expatriates, thrived on gossip and Emmanuel Christian's infamous daughter had become

a major topic of conversation in every salon and club. Emmanuel, immaculate as always in his tropical whites, appeared oblivious to the stares and whispers. But she knew he would be dying inside.

‘You are very quiet,’ he said.

‘Am I, papa?’

‘I'm sorry if you find my company tiresome. It is perhaps not as . . . exotic as you are used to.’

‘What do you want from me? You insist on parading me in public in this fashion. Do you want me to laugh and giggle with you like a little schoolgirl?’

Emmanuel looked away, embarrassed. ‘Of course I do not expect gratitude from you, but I did hope that ...’

‘Gratitude?’

‘Yes, gratitude, and please be good enough to keep your voice down.’

‘What am I supposed to be grateful for? Do you want me to thank you for throwing me out of my own home and then forcing me to abandon my own ...’ Adrienne could not bring herself to say it. She sipped her *citron pressé* while she composed herself. The glass trembled in her hand.

‘You left me no choice. Everyone knows that. And you can’t hide away in the villa for the rest of your life. It is best you are seen in polite company again. Let them all talk all they want, they’ll soon get tired of it. Anyway, it is not the past I wished to discuss with you. It is the future.’

‘Oh?’

‘You are still young… you can still make something of your life.’

‘My life? Is it really mine?’

Emmanuel sighed. ‘Please, Adrienne, you must stop all this bitterness. Look at you. You used to be such a pretty girl. What are you doing to yourself? You don't eat enough and there are rings under your eyes.’

‘I can't sleep.’

‘Do you need to see a doctor?’

She shook her head, feeling the tears coming again.

‘You're looking pale and thin.’

‘I'm all right! It's just . . . woman's troubles.’

That shut him up, as it always did. Yet she knew he was right. She wondered what had happened to her vanity, she knew she had let herself go a little. Somehow she couldn’t summon the strength for anything anymore. Every night she woke up and thought she could hear Michel crying.

Sometimes, in her half-sleep, she stumbled out of bed and fumbled her way around the bedroom looking for his cot, before she remembered where she was, and that Michel was not really there.

When she closed her eyes, she could still see the look on his face the day she left, heard his screams as she hurried down the steps. You're a monster, Adrienne.

Now there were other things to worry about. She had missed her period. Perhaps it was nothing; yet her month was usually so reliable. Perhaps the tailor's final insult had been the planting of yet another seed. What was she going to do?

She looked over the balustrade at the traffic in the street below. A bus swerved out of a side street, sent a cyclist sprawling headlong onto the road. There was a chorus of yells and klaxon horns and cycle bells as rickshaws and Renaults swerved around the fallen cyclist. The bus driver leapt out, screaming and gesticulating at the traffic.

Miraculously, the fallen man picked himself up and retrieved his crumpled bicycle. The bus driver ran over, laughing, and patted him on the back, congratulating him on his lucky escape. The cyclist grinned back, shook his hand, and trotted away, pushing his wrecked machine.

'That's the difference between the Westerner and the Asiatic,' Emmanuel said. 'It seems impossible for them to take responsibility for their own actions. The bus driver was to blame, yet he and the poor wretch he knocked into the road treated that whole incident as if it was an act of God. The one the bicycle thinks he's actually lucky and will probably go home and bet his last piastre in a card game.'

'You sound like a professor.'

'I'm merely trying to point out to you, as gently as possible, why your love affair with that loathsome Indian was doomed from the start. You were just another bicycle on his road, my dear.'

A shadow fell across the table. Adrienne looked up in surprise.

'*Monsieur* Christian,' a man said.

Emmanuel turned around. 'Ah, Jean-Claude. *Ca va?*'

'*Oui, ça va.*'

'I believe you have not had the pleasure of meeting my daughter. Adrienne, this is Jean-Claude Breton. He is on my staff at the bureau.'

Adrienne smiled. The man was tall and sparse, with thin, sandy hair and a wispy moustache. '*Monsieur* Breton.'

He bowed. ‘*Enchanté, mademoiselle.*’

‘Won't you join us for a glass of wine?’ Emmanuel offered.

‘*Merci, mais non,*’ Jean-Claude answered. ‘I am here on business. An important journalist from *Le Figaro* arrived in Saigon today. I have to meet him here and brief him on the situation in Tonkin. *Desolé.*’

‘You work too hard, Jean-Claude,’ Emmanuel chided gently. ‘Well done.’

Jean-Claude looked at Adrienne. She waited, thinking he was about to say something to her. Instead he blushed and looked away. ‘Well, I must go,’ he stammered. ‘Until this evening, then.’ He walked quickly away towards the stairs, tripping elaborately on the top step.

‘A very bright young man,’ Emmanuel said.

‘If you say so, then I suppose you must be right.’

‘This evening you can judge for yourself.’

‘This evening?’

‘I have invited him for dinner. He wants to meet you.’

♦ ♦ ♦

Mai Ong placed the saffron-colored chicken on the table and scurried out of the room to fetch the rice. Emmanuel picked up the bottle of red burgundy and refilled Jean-Claude's glass. ‘To France,’ he said.

‘To France,’ Jean-Claude repeated the toast. They drank.

Adrienne watched their guest over the rim of her glass. Jean-Claude Breton was perhaps younger than she had first thought. He had delicate, pale skin that would have made him appear almost feminine but for the wispy moustache on his upper lip. He had a sparse, loose-boned frame and his cream double-breasted suit hung loosely on his shoulders. He directed almost all his conversation at her father, though at times during the meal Adrienne had looked up and found him staring at her. But as soon as she caught his eye he looked away again.

She knew, of course, why her father had invited him here. He wanted to marry her off and finally wash his hands of her. She wondered that her father could be so naïve as to choose this one.

She ate slowly, trying to appear interested in the conversation. Jean-Claude and her father were discussing the reporter who had arrived at the Continental that morning. She stifled a yawn.

But nothing escaped her father: ‘I hope we're not boring you with all this talk,’ he said.

‘No, of course not,’ Adrienne said. ‘It's fascinating.’

‘Jean-Claude is one of my best officers. I shall be sorry to lose him.’

Adrienne looked directly at Jean-Claude for the first time. ‘You have been promoted?’

‘I am to take over the office in Dakar.’

‘Dakar? In Senegal?’

‘He is one of the youngest men ever to head a regional bureau,’ Emmanuel added. ‘He has a great future.’

‘My congratulations,’ Adrienne smiled and raised her glass in toast. And she thought: West Africa! My father really does want me out of the way!

After the coffee, Emmanuel excused himself to smoke a cigar on the veranda.

‘I'll join you, sir,’ Jean-Claude said.

‘No, no. Stay here and keep my daughter company. I shan't be long.’

They listened to Emmanuel's footfall on the stone flags outside. Jean-Claude drummed on the polished teak of the table with his fingertips. Adrienne sat back in her chair, and on an impulse she folded her arms, accentuating the creamy swell of her cleavage against the blue *crêpe-de-chine* of her evening gown. She watched a rash of perspiration, like tiny blisters, erupt on Jean- Claude's forehead.

‘That's a very pretty dress,’ he said finally.

‘Merci.’

Jean-Claude's gambits were exhausted. He looked nervously around the room. He looked like a hunted animal. Adrienne felt suddenly sorry for him. ‘When do you go to Dakar?’

‘Three more weeks.’ And then he added, ‘I shall be sorry to go … now.’

‘Oh. Why?’

‘I ... I should like to see you again.’

‘Perhaps you shall,’ Adrienne said, knowing it was quite out of the question. ‘May I have some more wine?’

‘Of course.’ He poured too quickly, and his hands shook. The burgundy splashed into the glass and some drops got on her dress. She jumped up and fled to the bathroom to try and get them off before they

stained her best frock. She didn’t even wait to listen to his mumbled apology.

♦ ♦ ♦

‘He's clumsy and he's quite impossible to talk to,’ Adrienne said. ‘I don't know why you ever invited him here.’

‘It seems you have not learned your lessons very well.’

‘What lessons?’

‘That romance does not put a roof over your head or food on your table. Jean-Claude is a decent young man with a great career ahead of him. And for some reason he seems to think you are the apex of femininity.’

‘He may be a pleasant enough gentleman. I want something more in a man.’

‘Someone who can mend a suit perhaps.’ Emmanuel picked up a crystal decanter and poured himself a brandy. He eased himself into his wing-back chair.

‘I will find my own husband.’

‘You don't understand, do you? You cannot stay in Saigon. Everyone knows about you here. You have a reputation, and this is not a good thing. It is precisely why Jean-Claude Breton is such an excellent choice for you. In three weeks he will be in Dakar. You can start a new life without insults and innuendo following you wherever you go.’

‘No one has insulted me.’

‘I have not given them the opportunity. But Saigon is a provincial French village surrounded by Asians. You will never outlive your past. Not here.’

Adrienne got up. ‘I'm tired. I think I shall go to bed.’

‘Think about it, *chèrie*. If you won't do it for your own sake, think about me.’

She gave him a bitter smile. ‘I wondered when you'd get to that.’ She looked down at her dress. ‘Look at it. It's ruined. Goodnight.’

CHAPTER 5

The following evening Emmanuel Christian was making his way along the Rue Pasteur a tall and arresting figure among the junior Vietnamese clerks in ill-fitting white shirts also heading home from government offices after their day's work. Old women in conical straw hats sold balloons on the footpath while their daughters hawked cigarettes. A lorry full of Algerian soldiers rumbled past.

Emmanuel Christian was lost to his own thoughts. He was thinking about Adrienne, wondered what it was he had done to deserve such a willful and immoral daughter. He had given her everything, sent her to a fine school, bought her the best clothes, taught her the impeccable manners that could have been her passport to the highest strata of French society, if she had wished it. In return she had disgraced him, blighted his career, turned him into an outcast and a pariah in the community where he had once been respected and admired.

But he had forgiven her for that and allowed her to return to his home. How had she repaid him? With venom. She was utterly impossible. There was no reasoning with her, just like her mother.

He passed the Café Givral. Its windows were covered with a fine mesh grille to prevent a repetition of the previous month's catastrophe when a grenade had been thrown inside, killing six soldiers who were seated at one of the tables and wounding sixteen others.

It was the hour of the aperitif. The café was packed with *fonctionnaires* like himself and a few officers from the French Expeditionary Corps. It was now considered a good spot to eat as the general consensus was that lightning never struck twice in the same place. A German legionnaire sat at one of the bentwood tables on the pavement, clicking his fingers imperiously for service.

The evening sky was lemon-grey, the shadows long. Emmanuel did not see the Vietnamese in the grey cotton shirt step out from the alley beside the Givral and toss the grenade almost casually into the doorway a few yards away.

There was a thunderous explosion and a bright sheet of light hurting his eyes. Something hit him very hard in the side of the chest. He fell on his back and thought for a moment that a cyclist had run up on the pavement

and collided with him. He started to swear at his unseen assailant, but the words would not come. He could not seem to move. The sky turned black. He did not know he was dying, nor did he hear the screams of the injured lying beside him on the pavement, writhing in pools of their own blood. -

His last thought was: I'll never understand women if I live to be a hundred.

♦ ♦ ♦

Adrienne sat on the verandah, her face empty.

‘Dead,’ she murmured softly to herself, ‘dead.’ She thought that saying the words aloud might make the fact of it seem more real. She still expected him to walk through the French windows at any moment, wearing his ridiculous velvet smoking jacket or his white topee, clutching a copy of *Le Figaro*, his face set in that habitual frown of disapproval. She expected to feel some remorse for the way she had treated him, or perhaps a sense of relief that he could no longer exercise his will over her. But instead she just felt numb.

He had been dead a fortnight now. His funeral had come and gone in a blur. The lawyer had read the Will. She had been shocked to discover that her father had placed conditions on his estate, provisions he had obviously conceived of five years before. He had stipulated that she would receive not a single franc until the day of her marriage to a French national. Without such a match, the money would remain in trust.

As if that was not enough bad news, she was now reasonably sure that she was pregnant, and the prospect chilled her to the soul. What was she going to do? The French administration was preparing to repatriate her to France. By the time she returned to Paris she would be three months pregnant and with no private means. ‘Who’s going to want you when you’re carrying some dirty native’s child?’ she heard her father say.

What was she going to do?

Mai Ong appeared suddenly on the porch. ‘Missy, there is a *Monsieur* Breton here to see you.’

At first Adrienne did not remember the name. ‘Breton? I don't know anyone of. . . *ah, oui*. Jean-Claude. The one who ruined my best dress.’

‘I tell him you not here?

‘No, it’s all right. I'll see him.’

Jean-Claude wore a black suit and tie, enduring the discomfort out of respect for Adrienne's father. Tiny bubbles of perspiration glistened on his forehead, and his cheeks were flushed pink in the heat. He dabbed at his face with a voluminous white handkerchief.

‘Mademoiselle,’ he said and bowed. ‘I've come to pay my respects and see how you are. Your father’s loss was a tragedy. He was one of the most respected men in the department.’

‘Thank you, *Monsieur* Breton,’ Adrienne said. ‘Won't you sit down?’ She looked at Mai Ong. ‘Bring us a jug of *citron pressé.’*

Grumbling, the old woman went inside.

‘I don't think she approves of me,’ Jean-Claude said.

‘She doesn't approve of anyone. My father was the only one who could do anything with her.’

‘Your poor father. It was a barbaric attack. Barbaric! It must be terrible for you.’

Adrienne nodded. ‘Yes, it is.’ He is so earnest, so sincere, she thought. It is a pity he is also so dull.

‘What will you do now?’

‘They are sending me back to France.’

‘Do you have family there?’

Adrienne shrugged her shoulders. ‘An uncle. But I haven't seen him for more than twelve years. I do not even know if he is still alive.’

‘Still, I am sure your father has provided for you.’

Adrienne forced a bitter smile. ‘Yes. He made provisions.’

Mai Ong hobbled back carrying a tray with a pitcher of lemonade and two glasses. After she had gone Adrienne turned to Jean-Claude and said: ‘Why did you come, really?’

He seemed startled by the directness of her question. ‘Well, I... as I said, I wanted to make sure if you were all right. If there is anything I can do ... ‘

‘It was very kind of you,’ Adrienne said, and she gave him the benefit of a radiant smile. ‘I appreciate it, Jean-Claude.’ She reached out and lightly touched his hand.

He flushed with pleasure at hearing her say his name and blushed at her touch. In fact it all pleased him so much he sent the pitcher of lemonade crashing to the floor.

♦ ♦ ♦

She saw Jean-Claude every day for the next week. There were lunches at the Ramuncho and the Valenco, dinners at the Continental and the Caravelle. Jean-Claude was attentive and courteous. He did not once try to kiss her. Adrienne grew impatient. Time was running out.

She had received notification that her ship would sail the following Wednesday. She calculated that she had four days to become Madame Jean-Claude Breton.

It was not a decision she had taken lightly. But her father - and a cruel twist of fate - had left her no choice. If she married Jean-Claude now, before she began to show, she would have the security of a husband, and she would be satisfying the conditions of her father's will. Of course, when he found out about the baby she would have some talking to do. But by then it would be too late for him to reconsider.

Adrienne was shocked at her own pragmatism. She was no longer the dewy-eyed romantic she had been at eighteen. She could now concede that her father had been right all along. She had been a fool. Besides, even if she didn't love Jean-Claude, she was fond of him. And she knew that he wanted her.

If only he would hurry up and say so.

♦ ♦ ♦

That Sunday they strolled hand-in-hand through the *Jardins Botaniques*. Vietnamese girls in their flowing silk *ao-dai* rode their bicycles along the shaded paths, their boyfriends looking slightly ridiculous beside them, dressed in shorts and cotton shirts and trilby hats. High above them, cranes built their nests in the topmost branches of the trees.

The park had a Sunday school atmosphere. There were kiosks selling tributes of artificial flowers, and white-bearded fortune tellers peering into their customers’ eyes with magnifying glasses.

Jean-Claude steered Adrienne towards a shaded path, his heart hammering in his chest. He had never felt so nervous in his whole life.

‘Adrienne ...’ He took a deep breath. ‘Adrienne, there is something I wanted to say to you.’

‘Yes, Jean-Claude?’

‘Soon you'll be leaving to go back to France. I will be going to Dakar. We may never meet again and ...’

‘Will you miss me?’

‘Oh yes,’ Jean-Claude said, and looked down at the wonderful, dark-haired girl at his side. He had never seen anything so beautiful in his life. ‘Oh yes, very much.’

‘What about your other girls? Will you miss them too?’

Jean-Claude flushed. ‘There aren't any others,’ he told her.

‘I don't believe you.’

‘I mean it. I love only you.’ There, it was said now. He hurried on: ‘I've never felt this way about any woman before.’ He waited for her to turn away, to say the words he had been dreading: You know I am very fond of you, but …

Instead, she looked intently into his eyes. ‘Do you, Jean-Claude? Do you, really love me?’

‘You know that I do.’

‘There are a lot of things about me you do not know.’

‘Nothing that could make me feel differently.’ Of course, he had heard the stories. Everyone in Saigon had heard about Emmanuel Christian's daughter. There were even rumors of a love child with one of the natives.

Jean-Claude did not care; in fact, it was her stigmata that had attracted him to her. It gave him an advantage with her, an advantage that he did not have with other women. She was young; she was beautiful; she was educated; what more could he want? Just last night, on the terrace of the Continental Hotel, he had noticed two other young men stealing glances in her direction, and he had seen the envy in their faces. Jean-Claude had been clumsy around women all his life and having a woman that other men wanted was a new experience for him.

‘What are you saying, Jean-Claude?’

‘Adrienne ...’ He swallowed hard. ‘Will you marry me?’

‘Why Jean-Claude! This is so sudden.’ She put a hand to her breast. ‘I do not know what to say. I was not expecting this.’

You do not have to answer straight away …’

She took his hands in hers. ‘But we do have much time. So perhaps, though it is so sudden, I think perhaps I know the answer …’

♦ ♦ ♦

Joginder Krisnan assumed an expression of practiced servility as a French woman in an expensive muslin dress ascended the stairs. It quickly changed to surprise, and then contempt:

‘What are you doing here?’

Behind him Sai's foot-pedal machine stammered into silence. Adrienne Christian, soon to be Breton, folded the parasol she had brought to keep the worst of the noon sun off her head, and looked around the room, crammed with the ghosts of sour memories. The reek of cardamom and turmeric made her want to vomit.

‘I am leaving Saigon. I am to be married.’

Joginder shrugged his indifference. ‘So?’

‘I want to see Michel before I go.’

He scratched irritably at his belly. ‘Why?’

‘I want to say goodbye.’

‘You can't. He's not here.’

‘When will he be back?’ It had taken all her resolve to come back here. She did not know what she hoped to achieve, but she had to see the boy one more time. To explain to him, perhaps. To make sure he was all right.

‘Look, he’s not here. I don't know where he is.’

‘Not here?’

‘I warned you. It’s not my fault. If you wanted him so badly, you should have taken him with you.’

Adrienne stared at the snarling, plumpish face of the man she thought she had once loved, and the oval-faced girl behind him. ‘No,’ she groaned. ‘No, you didn't.’

‘He was your brat. I never wanted him. You knew that.’

‘He was your son.’

‘I already have two sons. What do I want with another one?’

Adrienne slumped against the wall. ‘Oh, God, where is he?’

‘I told you, I don't know. Now go on, go. I don’t want you here anymore.’

Adrienne stumbled back down the stairs. She stood on the Rue Catinat, as Saigon bustled around her, numb and blind. What had she done? It was all her fault. Now she would never escape the rage of the angels.

June 1952

Soeur Gabrielle watched a small boy walk across the quadrangle below and slump into a corner, his back against the wall. It was the one called Michel. He had been brought there, pale and starving, six months before. His mother had simply abandoned him. He said she was French, for Heaven's sake. French!

Sometimes she found it very hard to keep her faith in a loving God among so much misery. She had of course seen much despair in her life. She had been born in Saigon thirty years ago and her circumstances had allowed her to see suffering every day in all its many and squalid forms. Her grandfather had been beaten to death while working as a contract laborer on a plantation in the Rung Sat during the rubber boom of the 1920s; two of her brothers had become addicted to opium and wasted away to skeletons; she had seen two of her fellow nuns raped and butchered by invading Japanese soldiers at Hue. Violence and degradation were as much a part of Vietnam as *nuoc mam* and the *ao-dai*.

Now the on-going war between the Viet Minh and the French had made many orphans. Here, at least, the children had a little food and some shelter. But still she wondered what she was saving them for. It was sinful to think that way, she knew; one must have faith.

She knew that little boy down there would never survive. He ate little, he had made no friends among the other children, he spoke to no one. She could scarcely guess at what he thought of the world and his place in it. She watched his head drop between his knees. He looked like a beaten dog.

No, that one wouldn't survive.

PART TWO

Michel & Valentine 1954-64

CHAPTER 6

‘The boy is an animal. A beast. I do not know what we are to do with him.’ The *canonesse* fidgeted with the rosary beads in her lap. *Soeur* Gabrielle had never seen her as agitated as this. ‘Well, go on. Speak your mind.’

‘I do not know what to say, Mother. I know the boy is difficult—’

‘Difficult!’

‘... but I am sure that in time—’

‘He has been with us more than three years. In that time he has caused us more trouble than all the other hundreds of children who have been here.’

Soeur Gabrielle bowed her head. ‘Yes, Mother.’

The old *canonesse* tapped impatiently on the edge of her desk. ‘He frightens me. I look in his eyes and I see only evil.’

‘He is only a boy, Mother.’

‘Yes, but one day he will be a man.’ The older nun got to her feet and went to the green-shuttered window. She listened to the sweet sound of the children's voices singing ‘O Holy Night’ in the chapel. She was proud of Le Sacré-Coeur. The orphanage provided shelter for almost a hundred and fifty children, orphans of the war or the unwanted half-caste *métis* of French soldiers. There was a name for them: *bui doi* - the dust of life; the beaten, the starving, the crippled.

The nuns had given shelter and succor to as many as they could.

But this one . . . this one was different. He spat their kindness back in their faces, refused food as often as he took it, even though his bones were visible through his skin, and cursed and struck at them with his fists.

Only *Soeur* Gabrielle could get anywhere near him.

‘What do you wish me to. do?’ the younger nun said.

‘I don't know. I pray for him constantly. As yet I have not heard the answer.’

‘He suffers, Mother.’

‘All these children suffer! Yet I have never seen such hatred, such venom in a child. How old must he be? Eight years, nine perhaps, no more.’

‘I am sure that given time ...’

‘Your faith is a credit to you, Sister. For myself I am worried about the other children here. His presence is having a poisonous effect on them.’

She looked up at the wall. A small white lizard darted from a crack in the ceiling and dashed for cover behind a cheap print of the Blessed Virgin.

‘Have you heard any more from the French Immigration, Mother?’

The *canonesse* shook her head. Two years ago, they had applied to have the boy repatriated to France, because of his obviously European blood. Such processes were notoriously slow.

‘Perhaps soon.’

‘Perhaps, Sister. That may be the answer for us, but I fear it will not be the answer for whoever else his life touches.’

Shouts echoed across the quadrangle from one of the classrooms. Moments later there was the sound of running feet on the cloister and *Soeur* Thérèse threw open the door:

‘Mother, come quickly!’

‘What is it? What has happened?’

‘Michel! He stabbed Kam with a knife!’

♦ ♦ ♦

Michel sat on a stool in the empty classroom staring at the dull red terracotta tiles. There was a bright splash of blood by the window.

Soeur Gabrielle watched the *canonesse* approach the small boy. She was holding a small bone-handled knife in her right hand. ‘Where did you get this?’

Michel looked up at her, his expression sullen. ‘I stole it from the kitchen.’

‘In God's name, what were you doing? You could have killed your classmate.’

‘They were reciting their lessons, Mother,’ *Soeur* said. ‘Michel was having difficulty with his reading.’

‘You stabbed Kam because he laughed at you?’

Michel didn't answer. The hooded eyes stared back at her, dark and malevolent.

The old nun turned to Thérèse. ‘How is Kam?’

‘The knife cut his arm. It is not serious.’

The *canonesse* handed the knife to *Soeur* Thérèse. ‘Take this back to the kitchen, Sister.’

After she had gone, she turned to *Soeur* Gabrielle. ‘I must send him away.’

‘Please, Mother. Give him one more chance. For the love of God.’

The *canonesse*'s hand went to the wooden crucifix at her neck. For a moment she seemed undecided. ‘You shame me, Sister,’ she said at last. ‘I hope your faith will prove justified.’

‘Please.’

The older nun nodded, almost imperceptibly. *Soeur* Gabrielle bowed her head in gratitude.

Souer Gabrielle knelt down in front of the small boy. The ragged white T-shirt looked oversize on his loose frame, and the legs stuck out of his baggy shorts like stalks.

‘Michel,’ the young nun said softly, ‘you must understand, we want to help you. We love you. The *canonesse* loves you. I love you.’

‘You love everyone.’

‘Yes. Yes, I do.’

‘So what good is your love to me?’

She did not know how to answer that. Finally, she said: ‘You must trust us, Michel.’

The boy hawked deep in his throat and spat in her face.

The *canonesse* gasped in outrage.

Gabrielle bowed her head and very deliberately wiped the spittle from her forehead with the hem of her robe. Then she leaned forward and kissed Michel's cheek.

♦ ♦ ♦

There was never a time that Michel decided his mother was not coming back for him. Even through those long, hungry nights sleeping on the streets or roaming the avenues of the French sector praying for a glimpse of her, there was not one single moment when he gave up hope.

When the nuns brought him here, he convinced himself that one day she would appear at the gates to fetch him and explain how it had all been a terrible mistake.

The realization of her betrayal did not come to him suddenly. His psyche would not allow it. It grew slowly, a bitter seed that took slow root deep in his soul and blossomed, like all terrible hurts, into a venomous rage.

The nuns were kind to him, but that only made him despise them more. He knew they were only trying to make him like them so they could hurt him too. After all, they were women; women could not be trusted.

The other children learned to leave him alone, terrified of his sudden, violent outbursts. Even the nuns were frightened of him.

Except *Soeur* Gabrielle.

She didn't seem to mind his curses and insults. No matter what he did, she took his part. Michel decided she must be crazy.

But then, today, she had shaken him.

He could still see her, the fleck of spittle running down her smooth brown forehead, her face set in that stupid half-smile, the sunlight from the window glinting on her spectacles. He saw her wipe away his spit with her *ao-dai*, could feel the tenderness with which she kissed him. She might as well have kicked him in the chest.

Now he lay on his back in the darkened dormitory and listened to the sobs of the smaller children, crying like they did every night, like he had done when he first came here. He felt the stirrings of doubt. He stared at the moon, framed by the open window beside his bed, and made up his mind.

♦ ♦ ♦

The line of children snaked across the cobbled courtyard. *Soeur* Gabrielle stood in the shade of the cloister, behind a wooden trestle, spooning watery rice porridge into the children's' enamel bowls with a ladle. The sun had barely risen but already the street beyond the gates was crowded with bicycles and *cyclopousses* and bent women in conical straw hats pushing their hand carts to the market.

She was about to pour another spoonful of the porridge and stopped. The little boy standing in front of her did not have his bowl with him. It was the *métis*, Michel. The boy always kept his head down, but this morning he looked openly into her face. Suddenly he reached out, grabbed her hand and kissed it. Then he turned and fled.

Soeur Gabrielle stared after him in amazement.

'The Lord be praised.' She turned around. It was *Souer* Thérèse.

‘You see, Sister,’ Gabrielle said, ‘miracles can happen.’

From that moment on, she gained a second shadow. Michel would be at her side first thing every morning, helping her dole out the rice porridge for breakfast, and then silently trailing her from classroom to classroom until the midday siesta. Even then, instead of going back to the dormitory, he would sleep in the cloister outside her room.

Every afternoon she would sit down with him in the classroom and help him with his reading; he would even sit and watch in the evenings while she knelt at her prayers in the chapel. On Sundays he helped her prepare the wine and wafers for the Mass.

All the other sisters at the Sacré-Coeur considered his transformation a miracle. Only the old *canonesse* was dubious.

‘You should take care with that child,’ she warned her, ‘the change in him may not be as great as you think.’

‘I do not understand, Mother.’

The old lady fingered the wooden crucifix at her neck. ‘Don't you find his attentions exhausting?’

‘Well yes, but ... ‘

‘Does he show the same devotion to any of the other Sisters?’

‘No ...’

‘No. With the others, he is just the same.’

‘It is progress. We cannot expect too much, too soon.’

‘Progress, *Soeur* Gabrielle? Perhaps. Or perhaps it is just the same thing all over again.’

‘I'm afraid I don't understand, Mother.’

‘For many years, Sister, I worked at the Hôpital Miséricorde. I learned that if you cut the skin, the veins will bleed, but after a while the blood will clot. This is normal, yes? But at the hospital I saw a few rare cases of children who were born without this healing in them. They cannot stop bleeding. Their wounds never heal.’

‘But last year when Michel fell in the courtyard ...’

‘I do not mean his physical body, Sister. He has a soul that bleeds and bleeds. You have staunched the flow, for now. But you must be careful not to make him dependent on you, or when he loses you he will bleed worse than before. Who will heal him then?’

Soeur Gabrielle inclined her head. ‘I think I understand, Mother.’

‘Tread carefully, Sister.’

When *Soeur* Gabrielle stepped out of the *canonesse's* study Michel was waiting for her. He fell in step behind her:

'Where are you going?'

'To the chapel.'

'To pray?'

'Yes, to pray.'

'Why?'

'It is what God expects.'

'What did the canoness say about me?'

Soeur Gabrielle stopped and looked down at him. The huge brown eyes stared frankly back at her. She was impressed, as she always was, by the power that seemed to lurk behind them.

'How do you know we were talking about you?'

He shrugged. 'I listened at the window.'

'It is wrong to eavesdrop. I've told you before.'

'Yes, Sister.'

She turned and made her way towards the chapel.

'But what did she say?'

'If you were listening, then you should know.'

'I heard, but I didn't understand.'

'Thank the Lord for that, then.'

They went into the chapel. It was dark, and the face of Christ on the large crucifix above the altar stared at them in mute agony.

'You must do penance,' *Soeur* Gabrielle said.

'Why?'

'For eavesdropping. Twenty Hail Marys. You can kneel beside me while I pray.'

'Yes, *maman*.'

Soeur Gabrielle stopped. It was as if someone had poured ice water on her soul. 'What did you say?'

Michel started to walk away from her. 'Nothing.'

She caught his shoulder, span him around. 'I'm not your mother. Do you understand? I love you, Michel, but I can never be your mother.'

'Yes, of course. I understand.'

But as he walked away from her down the aisle of the chapel, *Soeur* Gabrielle thought about what the Mother Superior had just told her and she realized the old nun was right.

He was still bleeding. He would never stop.

CHAPTER 7

May 1955

The *canonesse* summoned *Soeur* Gabrielle to her office. As she walked in she indicated the ancient rattan chair on the other side of her desk. ‘Please sit down. Sister.’

‘Thank you, Mother.’

‘I'm afraid I have some bad news.’ The old nun took a pair of wire spectacles from her drawer and put them on. She glanced quickly at the letter in front of her and slid it across the desk. ‘It is from Père Jean-Paul in Hue.’

Soeur Gabrielle read the letter quickly, the onion-skin paper trembling in her hand. She made the sign of the cross. ‘May her soul find peace in heaven,’ she murmured.

‘I am sorry, Sister. Still, there was no pain. The Lord was merciful.’

Soeur Gabrielle fought back tears. ‘Yes, Mother.’

‘Is there anyone to look after your father now?’

‘No ... I was ... the only daughter.’

‘The abbess says he is a sick man.’

Soeur Gabrielle nodded. She did not trust herself to speak.

‘You must go home. You will be excused your duties here for as long as is necessary.’

‘But Mother ...’

‘Your father needs you.’

Soeur Gabrielle got up to leave.

‘We will say Mass for your mother this Sunday.’

‘Thank you.’

Soeur Gabrielle turned and fled. But when she reached the cloister she found Michel crouched down by the open window outside the office. He had heard every word. ‘You won't leave me?’ he said.

Gabrielle tried to brush past him but he clutched at her leg, making her stumble.

‘You mustn't leave me!’

‘Please, Michel! Not now! Please, leave me alone!’

The *canonesse* appeared in the doorway. ‘Michel! For the love of God! Let her be!’

‘You mustn't send her away!’

‘Let her go!’

‘You mustn't!’

The *canonesse* grabbed his arm but he twisted away from her, trembling with rage.

He turned back to Gabrielle. ‘Please, *maman*! Don't do this!’

She ran towards the chapel, sobbing.

The *canonesse* took a step towards the little boy but he backed away, his face contorted like a wild animal. ‘I hate you! I hate all of you! I hope you all die!’ And he fled.

♦ ♦ ♦

By 1955 the French soldiers had gone but the war continued to rage. The battle of Dien Bien Phu, almost a year before, ended with the rout of the French military on the Plain of Jars, and should have ended the conflict in Indochina.

Instead, President Diem took power in Saigon with the full backing of the United States of America.

Diem declared war on the Viet Cong, and also prepared to take on the Binh Xuyen, an army of bandits who had risen to prominence under the protection of the departed French administration. Jealous of their power and their wealth, he set out to break them.

And so, on March 28th, he sent paratroopers to attack their stronghold at the Saigon police headquarters. The bandits, backed by the remaining French officers of the *Deuxième Bureau* and the SDECE, responded the next night with a mortar attack on the presidential palace.

Sporadic street fighting continued around the capital for the next month but life in the orphanage remained largely unaffected by the battle that was going on in the rest of Saigon. Sometimes at night Michel heard the rattle of machine- gun fire or the distant crump of mortars but he ignored them. They were as much a part of the background hubbub of his world as the cries of the street vendors outside the gate, or the blaring klaxon horns of the old Peugeot taxis.

But the morning of May 2nd was different. It was on that day that Diem's ARVN made their final push to drive the Binh Xuyen out of Saigon.

The din from the city center was continuous. The nuns spoke in whispers, fingering their rosary beads and looking nervously at the city skyline, as skeins of smoke trailed into the sky. The street was choked with cars and motor scooters and bicycles. Michel stood at the gates and watched the chaos of refugees, pathetic bundles of possessions tied to the frames of bicycles, or piled high on hand carts, pots and wicker baskets of ducks wobbling crazily beside screaming, runny-nosed children.

The fighting was getting closer.

Suddenly three armed soldiers ran by, shoving people aside with their rifle butts. They had snarling tiger badges on their black berets: Binh Xuyen.

One old man riding an ancient bicycle was too slow and the bandit shouldered him into the gutter. The bamboo cage teetering on the back split open and two ducks spilled out, squawking and spluttering on the pavement.

He heard the hollow thud-thud of mortars. Plumes of black smoke rose into the hot blue sky close by. Another crump. Another thud.

They were getting closer.

Debris clattered into the courtyard.

The people in the street started to wail, scrambling over each other to get away.

‘MICHEL!’

He turned. It was *Soeur* Gabrielle. She was standing at the doorway of the chapel, her arms held out towards him.

‘Michel! Quickly now! Come inside!’

He realized he was the only one still in the courtyard. The other children had already been ushered inside.

He ran towards her.

Another crump.

‘Quickly now, Michel!’

There was a high-pitched wail overhead. Curious, he looked up.

‘MICHEL!’

Instinctively he threw himself onto the ground.

The explosion lifted his body off the cobblestones, dropping it again with such force that it smashed his nose. He felt a stinging pain as debris

smacked down on his back and legs.

Then there was an unnatural silence.

He got slowly to his feet, patting down his shirt and shorts. Except for a nose-bleed, he seemed to be unharmed. He shook his head, like a wet dog, his ears still ringing from the blast of the exploding mortar shell.

The orphanage was gone. In its place was a pile of smoking, flaming rubble. Then the moaning began, a terrible animal sound, the weeping of those still beneath the hot stones and burning timbers.

Another shell exploded a hundred yards away and more debris clattered into-the courtyard around him. He ignored it.

He walked towards the chapel, or rather where the chapel had once been. The heat of the flaming timbers was intense and scorched his face. He saw an arm protruding from the rubble, rosary beads still clutched between the fingers.

He fell on his knees and scrabbled at the bricks, clearing away whatever he could. Her face was white, except for the deep gash on her temple. He was surprised how little she had bled. He pulled at her arm, tried to drag her clear. It was much easier than he expected. He felt her body coming free.

He fell backwards. He lay there for a few moments, stunned, staring at the disembodied arm in his hands, blood seeping from the stump and spilling on to his shirt. Then he yelled and threw the terrible thing away from him into the jumble of masonry.

It occurred to him then, with absolute clarity, what had happened: I hate you! I hate all of you! I hope you all die!

He had wanted them dead and some power within him had destroyed them. He need not be afraid any more. He had the power to judge.

♦ ♦ ♦

Saigon was inured to war. Only three days after the fighting ended, even while the sweet, cloying stench of death still hung over the city, the street cafés reopened for business.

Michel stood outside the Café Seine and the smell of hot food made his stomach growl. He had eaten nothing for three days. On the day of the bombing he had found fresh water in a jar, miraculously untouched in the ruins of a house. Later he had found a little rice in the wreckage of a

godown near the river, but he had nothing to boil it in, so he tried to eat it raw. It had made his intestines bleed.

They were mostly Americans in the café. There was only one Corsican at the pavement tables, a tough- looking man in a white tropical suit, drinking Pernod. At the next table was a bony crew cut man in an MACV uniform devouring a plate of grilled fish and rice. He watched, hypnotized.

The waiter saw him and shooed him away as if he were a dog.

Michel made to go, but when the waiter moved off to serve another customer, he came back again. He had to eat. He had to have food.

The American leaped to his feet to greet a Vietnamese girl in a silk *ao-dai*. Michel knew it was his chance.

He hopped across the little border of potted plants that divided the footpath from the tables and snatched the American's plate off the table. Then he leapt back into the street and started to run.

'Wait! You!'

He knew someone was chasing him, but he didn't look back. If he could slip into the maze of alleyways off the Tu Do he would be safe. As he ran he stuffed the remains of the fish, whole, into his mouth.

Something hit him hard in the chest and he dropped onto his back, choking on the food. The plate clattered into the street and even before he could get his breath someone grabbed him by the collar and pulled him to his feet.

He looked up. A policeman. He must have run straight into him. He tried to squirm away, but the *flic* took a firm hold of his arm and he yelled out in pain.

The American ran up, panting. His face was flushed. 'That's him! That's the thieving little cocksucker!' The slap caught him hard across the side of the face. His eyes watered and blood leaked from his injured nose. Michel howled, not with pain, but with frustration. The force of the slap had knocked the rest of the fish out of his mouth before he could swallow it.

A bottle-green police jeep pulled up. Michel was bundled into the back. The policeman said something to the American which seemed to mollify him. A policeman sat in the back of the jeep with a boot on his neck. Michel gave up struggling. He hoped, wherever they were taking him, they might think to give him some rice.

The children's prison was on the outskirts of the city, on Cach Mang, the main highway to Tan Son Nhut airport. It was a two-story red brick building, originally built by the French a decade before. If was surrounded by seven-foot-high walls, surmounted with barbed wire and broken glass.

Michel was bundled out of the jeep and marched across the boiling yard into the chief warden's office.

Pham Chi Thien was a hollow-cheeked ex-army officer with graying hair and a neat black moustache. Michel was shoved across the room towards his desk.

Thien stared at him, his hands folded neatly on the desk top, the long fingers restless as butterflies.

‘What's this one here for?’ Thien said. His voice was thin, high-pitched.

‘He tried to steal food from a café,’ the policeman said. ‘Be careful. He tried to bite my hand.’

Thien got up and walked around the desk. He smiled like a kindly uncle, revealing two gold teeth.

‘Leave us,’ Thien said to the man who had brought him in.

Thien put his hands on his hips. He towered over Michel. ‘What is your name?’

‘Michel Christian.’

‘Ah, a *métis*. A Frenchman's bastard.’

Michel said nothing. Thien lit a cigarette. ‘You have a choice. Your stay here can be very easy or very hard. You must understand. No one cares what happens to you. Nobody. You are dust. If you die, no one cares. Do you understand?’

Michel understood this part perfectly. This was not news.

Thien gave a high-pitched giggle. ‘If you are nice to me, I will be nice to you.’

Michel didn't know what Thien meant, even when the warden started to unbutton the front of his khaki drill pants. ‘In this place I am God. You should always do everything you can to make God pleased with you.’

Michel hawked the bile from deep in the back of his throat and spat, expertly, in Thien's face. The globule of saliva tracked down Thien's cheek.

For a moment Thien's eyes blazed. Then, unexpectedly, he giggled again. ‘You choose that way, then? All right, then, little *métis*. I don’t mind. Either way, I will enjoy myself.’

♦ ♦ ♦

There were no windows in the room and the walls were bare concrete. In the corner a chain had been suspended from a hook in the ceiling. Michel hung upside-down, his feet manacled to the chain, his arms cuffed behind his back. He was naked.

Michel saw Thien's grinning face swing in and out of his vision. His body jerked at the end of the chain.

‘It is pointless to struggle,’ Thien said. ‘It will only make it worse.’

Michel closed his eyes and concentrated on the pain. The heavy metal cuffs on his wrists strained his arms almost out of their sockets but he bit his lip and willed himself not to cry out. Whatever happened he would not give Thien the satisfaction.

Thien unfastened the clasp of his belt. It was leather, with a solid silver clasp. ‘Now I will show you how we treat thieves here at Van Trang.’

He wrapped the two loops of the leather around his palm so that the silver buckle dangled loose by the side of his leg, twitching like a snake. He swung Michel around on the end of the chain, so that his back and buttocks were towards him.

Michel heard the belt whistle through the air and then it was as if someone had taken a knife and slashed cleanly through the muscles of his back down to the bone. The spasmodic contraction of his ribs forced a sob through his lips.

I won't scream, he promised himself. I won't scream.

He waited for the next stroke, but it did not come. Thien was too clever. He allowed the little boy to twitch and groan on the end of the chain for almost a minute before the belt sliced through the air once again.

Michel heard the wet slap of the buckle against his skin and this time he bit down hard on his tongue to keep from crying out. He tasted his own blood in his mouth. It felt as if his whole body were on fire. He realized with despair that if Thien hit him again he would not be able to keep silent.

The belt sliced and hissed.

Michel screamed.

But it was not the cry of a small boy. It was a bellowing roar that filled his own ears, drowning out all his other senses. He screamed again and again and again, and his screams continued to echo around the stone walls

long after Thien had finally tired of his game and left him hanging alone in the cell.

‘ADRIENNE!’

‘*MAMAN!*’

‘ADRIEEEEEENNNNNEEEE!!!’

CHAPTER 8

The moon-faced boy knelt over him, and grinned. ‘He beat you, huh?’

Michel opened his eyes. He was lying on the stone floor of a narrow cell. He tried to sit up but the sudden slash of pain across his back and buttocks made him gasp. Instead he eased himself carefully onto his side and looked around. There were four other boys in the cell. One of them lay on his back, his eyes rolled back in his head. There were needle tracks along the veins of his arms and legs. There were flecks of foam on his lips.

The boy opposite him was asleep, his legs splayed, skeletal and useless. Polio, Michel decided.

The other two boys were both older. They sat against the far wall, staring at him with casual indifference.

The moon-faced boy shoved a metal pannikin into his chest. ‘I saved you some rice. You can pay me back tomorrow, out of your ration.’ Michel snatched the bowl from him and fisted the rice into his mouth.

‘You've got a pretty face,’ the boy said. ‘Thien likes the ones with pretty faces. That's what got you into this mess.’

‘Number ten motherfucking bastard,’ Michel grunted, using the worst words he knew.

‘They call me No Name. What about you, huh?’

‘Michel.’

‘French, huh? A Round Eye. That's where you got the pretty nose, huh?’

‘My mother was French. Number ten whore.’

‘She dead, huh?’

No Name was a cherub-faced Tonkinese with bronze crab-apple cheeks and quick, darting eyes. His hair was shaved close to his scalp. ‘What did you do?’

‘I stole an American's dinner.’ Michel shoveled the last few grains of rice into his mouth.

Michel put his fingers gingerly underneath his shirt, felt the swollen and raised wheals on his back, and the crusts of blood where the buckle had ripped his flesh.

‘Don't worry about that. He always beats the new kids. Especially the ones who won't play little woman games with him.’

‘What is this place?’

‘Van Trang. It's the kids' prison.’

‘How long will they keep us here?’

‘Long as they want. How old are you, huh?’

‘I don't know. How old are you?’

‘Nine maybe. How long you been on the street?’

Michel toyed with a lie. He decided on the truth. ‘Three days.’

‘Shit. A virgin.’ He put his hand on Michel's shoulder. ‘It's all right, Round Eye. I'll look after you.’

♦ ♦ ♦

Michel had his hair shaved for lice and then they gave him a metal bowl and a tin cup. Twice a day he stood in line for his rice ration and a small piece of salty, bony fish. It was barely edible and even when he managed to force it down, he got a rash on his body which itched unbearably. After a few days Michel, like most of the other boys, threw away the fish and just ate the rice.

He found out that the women who cooked the food in the prison kitchens received a weekly allowance to buy food for the inmates of Van Trang. They always bought the cheapest rice and never bothered to clean or scale the fish. They pocketed the extra money themselves.

The daily rations, meager enough for the Vietnamese children, was barely enough to keep him alive. He grew even thinner. The wounds on his back became infected and began to ooze.

At night he slept on the hard stone floor in his cell, listening to the maddening whine of the mosquitoes, trying to stay awake. He had woken up that first night and found himself staring at the whiskered maw of what he had thought was a small, grey kitten. He reached out for it and it scampered away. It was only then that he realized it was a rat, almost a foot long.

There were plenty of others just like him at Van Trang. At night they would come skittering out of the drains to gnaw at toes and shins.

And every day there was drill. Thien stood them in line and paraded them like soldiers in the hot midday sun. The drill would continue until at least a dozen boys had fainted. These were earmarked for further duty in the

afternoon, cleaning out the kitchens and the toilets. Thien said he was teaching them discipline.

Michel never fainted, although there were times when the sky and the buildings and the ground swam in his vision in a gelatin blur. If it was discipline, then he learned it well. He stumbled many times, but he never fell.

It made no difference. Thien never forgave Michel for that mouthful of spit. Once every two or three days the guards came to Michel's cell, dragged him down the corridor to Thien's office, and beat him with bamboo sticks while Thien watched, blowing smoke rings at the ceiling.

Discipline.

The days and weeks and months blurred to a nightmare of pain and hunger and despair.

♦ ♦ ♦

Then two things happened very suddenly that changed the routine of life at Van Trang.

It began with a long, piercing scream from Thien's office. It was a hot, oppressive afternoon, the rains beating on the roof and raising steam from the asphalt on the drill ground. As they cowered in their cells the boys heard footsteps running up and down the corridor, heard Thien's panicked shouts. Much later there was the clang of the ambulance bell.

No Name unraveled the mystery for them.

‘Thien had a new boy in there this afternoon,’ he told them that night, his eyes shining with excitement, ‘another pretty one like Michel, huh.’

‘What happened to him?’ Michel said.

‘He bit it off,’ No Name slapped the floor with the palms of his hands in excitement. ‘Thien took his pants down and the boy put it in his mouth and bit it off!’

The other boys clapped and cheered. All except Michel. ‘What's the matter with you, huh?’ No Name asked him.

‘I wanted to hurt him myself,’ Michel said. ‘I wanted to see him scream. Not just hear it.’

They never found out what happened to the new boy. Ever.

♦ ♦ ♦

When the new chief warden arrived, the gratuitous beatings stopped. A Round Eye nurse from Saigon Hospital was allowed to visit them every few days and she handed out clothes and soap and medicines. When Phuong, one the boys in Michel's cell, got diarrhea and started vomiting, Michel asked the nurse to come and look at him.

She was from a place called Australia, a country Michel had never heard of. She was tall with long bony arms and legs and pale, freckled skin. She spoke some French, but her voice had a curious accent that Michel could not understand. It was like a duck quacking.

Michel and No Name watched as she bent down to examine Phuong, her long fingers probing his abdomen, then feeling for the pulse at his wrist. She put a little silver thermometer under his tongue and when she took it out again she shook her head in concern. She frowned at the festering sores from the rat bites on his ankles and at the dirt encrusted in his hair and on his face.

When she stood up she said something to the new warden who shrugged and shook his head. Half an hour later one of the guards carried Phuong out of the cell. From the barred window they watched him being put in the white nurse's battered Peugeot.

‘They're taking him to the hospital!’ No Name whispered.

Michel smiled. Phuong had just showed him the way out of Van Trang.

♦ ♦ ♦

‘Thien's coming back,’ No Name whispered. They were on their hands and knees in the corridor outside the warden's office, scrubbing the stone floor with stiff wire brushes. They had a bucket of water and a bar of thick soap between them.

‘How do you know?’

‘One of the guards told me. He said: 'If you think he had a squeaky voice before, you should hear him now!' No Name laughed. He seemed to think this was funny.

Michel was horrified. ‘If he's coming back we have to get out of here. That vicious bastard will take it out on all of us.’

‘Especially you, huh?’

Michel did not need to be reminded. After the new warden had taken over at the prison he had been happy enough to remain here. At least they

were fed, even if the rations were meager. He did not know if he could survive back on the street.

But if Thien was coming back, he had to get away.

‘If I get out of here, will you come with me?’

‘How will you survive without me, huh?’

Michel reached into the bucket and took out the soap. He broke it in half and gave one piece to No Name. Then he put his half in his mouth and started to chew. ‘Eat it,’ he said.

‘Are you fucking crazy?’

‘Eat it.’

‘This stuff will make you sick.’

Michel forced himself to swallow the first mouthful. ‘Yes, it will make us sick. If we have enough, it will make us sick enough for them to send for the Round Eye nurse.’

No Name understood. He hesitated, then put the hard lye soap in his mouth. He gagged once but managed to keep himself from vomiting. Then he swallowed.

After they had eaten the soap they went to one of the guards and told him they needed more soap. He took them to the storeroom. They went inside, and No Name collected another bar of soap and while the guard was not looking Michel slipped another two bars into the pockets of his shorts.

Then they went back to their work, scrubbing the floors while they slowly chewed their way through the three bars of lye soap.

♦ ♦ ♦

Michel rolled on to his side and dry-retched. He had long ago emptied the contents of his stomach and all that was left was bile. His own stench filled his nostrils. The Australian nurse touched his forehead with her cool, moist hand and then slipped the little silver thermometer under his tongue.

No Name lay doubled over on the other side of the cell. His face was knotted in agony from the cramps. ‘Fuck you, Round Eye,’ he whispered. ‘You're fucking crazy!’

‘Shut up!’ Michel hissed. ‘It's working!’

‘We're going to die!’

The nurse got up and left the cell. A few minutes later she came back in, followed by the warden.

He could not understand much of what she said but he recognized the two words he wanted to hear most of all:

Saigon Hospital.

♦ ♦ ♦

The hospital was in the city center near the market, and it was the poorest and most crowded in Saigon. The entrance hall served as the emergency room and consisted of just half a dozen stretchers on wooden stands. When the stretchers were full, patients needing treatment were left to lie on the floor.

When they arrived, there were just two nurses and a young, fresh-faced medical student on duty. The doctors had all gone home. The student and nurses were crowded around one of the stretchers where an old man lay heaving and choking, clawing at the empty air like he was drowning.

The Round Eye nurse squatted beside them on the floor and watched. Then the young Vietnamese medic said something to her in English and she got up to help him.

Michel twisted his head around. No Name lay on the stretcher beside him, his face white with pain. ‘How are you feeling?’

‘I just want to die. How about you?’

Michel nodded. ‘Think you can move?’

‘Now?’

‘Why not?’

Michel raised himself on one elbow, fought back a wave of nausea and looked around for the nurse. She was busy, bent over the stretcher doing something to the old man's chest. Michel got on his knees and crawled to the door. No Name followed.

Michel stumbled to his feet. He immediately broke out in a cold sweat and he had to close his eyes and hold onto the wall as the world spun and dipped around him. Finally the nausea passed. He felt light-headed, but he knew he could make it to the gates. He turned to No Name.

‘Ready?’

His friend was too weak even to answer.

Michel looked over his shoulder. No one was paying them any attention. He staggered out of the door, No Name close behind him. A few moments later they were back in the streets of Saigon.

♦ ♦ ♦

The smell of wood smoke from a thousand cooking fires drifted across the city. The shells of bombed-out buildings were silhouetted against a mauve dusk.

‘Where now?’ Michel said.

‘Follow me,’ No Name told him. ‘I will take you to my home.’

No Name picked his way through the darkening streets as if it were the middle of the day. Michel panted, struggling to keep up as his friend darted and twisted through narrow alleys into the rubble strewn streets of the Arroyo Chinois where the worst of the fighting between the ARVN and the Binh Xuyen had taken place a few months before. As night fell the crumbling skeletons of houses and godowns rose ghostly and desolate against the glow of a yellow moon.

No Name suddenly stopped, caught Michel's arm. ‘Down here!’ He jumped into the blackened maw of a crater and was immediately lost from sight in the shadows.

‘Come on, jump!’ he hissed from the darkness.

Michel took a deep breath and followed, landing with a jolt and twisting his ankle on a piece of rubble. No Name helped him to his feet. ‘Nearly there.’

They were in the ruins of what had once been a cellar. Half the floor had caved in, leaving a scree slope that led down to the basement floor. From the blackness of this desperate cave came an eerie glow of light. It came from a small, orange fire; there were three tiny shapes huddled around it.

One of the figures leapt to its feet and rushed towards them. Michel saw something glinting in the darkness, probably a knife.

‘Three Finger!’ No Name shouted. ‘Dinh! Tiger Eye! It's me!’

The figure stopped in its tracks. ‘No Name?’ It was a girl's voice.

‘Yes, it’s me.’

‘Who’s that?’

‘I've brought a friend with me.’

‘A friend?’ a voice said from around the tiny fire. ‘Shit! That's less food for the rest of us.’

‘Come on,’ No Name said, pushing Michel ahead of him. ‘Sit down. Make yourself at home.’

Michel slumped down among the bricks and chunks of mortar. No Name crouched next to him. No Name's friends were cooking something over the tiny fire. They had skewered it on a long stick and were roasting it over the flames. Fat from the charred creature sizzled on the coals. Michel suddenly realized what it was. 'A rat,' he whispered.

'Out here it's our turn,' No Name whispered cheerfully. 'In Van Trang they bite us. Out here, we bite them.'

The girl with the knife lifted it off the fire and cut it into portions with her knife. Michel hung his head, exhausted, and listened to the rustle of lizards and mice in the rubble around him.

No Name nudged him, proffered a piece of smoke-blackened meat. 'Here, eat it,' he said.

Michel took it, picked gingerly at it with his fingers.

'Not like that. Like this.' No Name put his share of the rat in his mouth and bit down. Michel heard the bones crunching between his teeth and a rivulet of grease flowed down his chin and glowed in the firelight. 'A boy who can eat soap can manage a piece of good home-cooked meat, huh?'

Michel put the rat in his mouth and chewed. It's just another kind of meat, he told himself. What does my stomach care when I'm this hungry?

Michel closed his eyes and snuggled into a niche in the rubble as if it were soft feather bolster. He could hear gunfire in the distance; cats cried like babies as they scavenged a rubbish heap.

He thought of Adrienne.

He wondered what she was doing now. Sleeping in soft sheets somewhere, he supposed, with good food, 'warm and safe.

While she abandoned me to this.

Well, I will survive, he promised to the black silence.

I will survive, and I will come back to haunt you. All of you.

'But especially you, Adrienne,' he said aloud. 'Especially you.'

CHAPTER 9

1960

Dakar, West Africa

Dakar was the showpiece of French West Africa and as Francophile as Paris itself. The common language was French; there were French restaurants everywhere; the *fonctionnaires'* wives could buy fashion direct from the Faubourg St-Honoré and in the harbor the tricolor flew from the stern of warships riding at anchor.

Modern skyscrapers rose above the minarets and clustered shanties of the native medina. Gangly Senegalese strode through the streets in bright djellabas, their women in rakish turban-like *moussoires*, their flowing *bous-bous* swirling in a kaleidoscope of color. For eight months of the year the sun shone every day in a cloudless sky, reflecting from the whitewashed buildings and sparkling in the blue of the harbor.

The villa of Jean-Claude and Adrienne Breton stood on the Plateau in the neat and prosperous French section of the town, looking over Bernard Bay and Cap Manuel. Root-hogs sometimes snuffled under the branches of the acacia trees in the garden, while swallows darted in and out of the eaves.

It was late afternoon. Adrienne dozed on the shaded porch in a wicker chair, listening to the sleepy drone of insects in the garden. The ocean breeze touched her face, bringing with it the aroma of *cacahouites* -roasted peanuts - from one of the mills outside the town.

She heard footsteps on the porch. It was Valentine.

'Bonjour, *maman*.'

Adrienne opened her eyes. 'Ah, ma petite, it is you. Come here and give your *maman* a kiss.'

Valentine obediently kissed her mother's cheek. Then she sat down on one of the cane deckchairs beside her.

Adrienne lay there and admired her daughter. She was a stunningly pretty little girl, tall for her age, and with hair as black and glossy as the

feathers of a raven. Today she wore it tied in a pony tail at the back of her head, leaving two long bangs to dance at her cheeks. Her skin had tanned to mahogany in the African sun and it accentuated the astonishing whiteness of her teeth when she smiled.

Strange to think that eight years ago, her first glimpse of the child had filled her with terror. They had laid her in her arms, the umbilicus still pulsing, and she had wanted to cry. Valentine had been born with olive skin and a shock of thick black hair. Adrienne's skin was as pale as alabaster, and Jean-Claude was as every bit as pale as she. Even the doctor appeared embarrassed.

And so she lay in her bed at the military hospital in dread, anticipating the scene when Jean-Claude arrived to see his new-born daughter. He must already know the child was not his, of course, though they had never spoken of it. After all, it was barely six months since they had married in Saigon, and the child was a healthy seven pounds.

But to her astonishment it seemed Jean-Claude had no intention of breaking the spell. ‘She has my father's black hair,’ he crooned, ‘but she has my features.’

Adrienne breathed sigh of relief. She knew what he was doing. After all, there was no solace to be gained from the truth, not for either of them. If she had deceived him at first, then later he had fully complied with it. She had gained the husband she needed; he had the wife he wanted. She had realized with a surge of gratitude that he didn’t care whose child it was.

And in the end, everything had worked out.

‘Sit and down and talk to me for a while,’ Adrienne said. ‘How was school? Did you work hard?’

‘Yes, *maman*.’

‘Tell me what you did.’

Valentine began to talk, stroking Adrienne's hair, the sound of her voice soothing her like a drug. Adrienne drifted back to sleep, taking refuge from the specters that haunted her every day.

♦ ♦ ♦

Valentine watched the little pool of saliva that had collected at the corner of her mother's lips overflow, and bead slowly down to her chin. Safe now from her mother's gaze, Valentine allowed herself a frown of

distaste as she sniffed the sour smell of wine on her mother's breath. Her eyes fell on the empty bottle of vin ordinaire beside the chair.

She could not remember when it had ever been different. Ever since she was a little girl her mother had been this way, slow and fat and lazy like an old cat. She wondered what her father had ever seen in her.

And there was the wine. Even at eight years old Valentine was old enough to know that her mother was addled by it. She felt sorry for her, but she hated her as well. She looked longingly towards the garden and the cliffs beyond. Once Adrienne was asleep soon she could escape.

‘Michel,’ Adrienne murmured, her eyes flickering in half-sleep. ‘Michel ...’

Valentine started at the unfamiliar name. ‘*Maman?*’ She leaned closer. ‘*Maman?*’

She waited but Adrienne did not say anything more, and the secret she had so tantalizingly glimpsed was locked away again in the world of her dreams. Valentine let her mother's hand slip back on to the day bed and she fled into the warm sunshine.

♦ ♦ ♦

When Jean-Claude got home that afternoon, Adrienne was still asleep in the wicker chair, her mouth open, snoring. He noted with disappointment that she was still in her nightgown.

‘Jemal! Jemal, where are you?’

The houseboy appeared as if by magic. ‘*M'sieur?*’

‘How long has Madame Breton been out here?’

‘Since it is twelve hours and thirty,’ Jemal said, his head bobbing up and down obsequiously. ‘So sorry. So sorry.’

Jean-Claude handed Jemal his topee and cane. ‘Don't apologize, it's not your fault. Has she been drinking?’

‘*Un peu, M'sieur.*’

Jean-Claude waved him away. ‘All right, you can go.’ He turned back to his wife, gripped her by the shoulders and shook her. ‘Adrienne!’

She opened one eye and then her head fell back on her chest.

‘Adrienne!’ He shook her again.

Adrienne roused herself and wiped her mouth with the back of her hand. Jean-Claude was reminded of the opium addicts he had seen in

Saigon, they had those same empty eyes and drooping lips.

‘What do you think you're doing?’ he hissed. ‘If you want to sleep, go to your room. Don't loll out here in front of the servants like a Left Bank drunk!’

‘I'll do whatever I want,’ Adrienne said. ‘I need a drink. Jemal! Jemal!’

The houseboy appeared instantly on the veranda. Jean- Claude span around. ‘Go away! Go back to the kitchen!’

‘Jemal, get me a drink!’ Adrienne shouted.

‘Go away, I said! Go back to the kitchen!’

Jemal looked in frank terror from one to the other, then fled.

Adrienne glared at her husband. ‘How dare you!’

‘You've had enough to drink.’

‘Leave me alone.’

‘No. We need to talk.’

‘I don't want to talk. Just leave me the hell alone.’

‘I cannot endure this anymore. Can't you see what you're doing to yourself? Don't you care?’

‘Go to hell.’

Adrienne staggered to her feet and tried to push past him. He caught her arm and pushed her down again. He leaned over her, his face inches from hers. ‘Please, Adrienne. Please stop this.’

‘Stop what? What are you talking about?’

‘What is wrong? Can't you tell me? Why are you doing this to us?’

‘I'm not doing anything.’

‘No, you're not, you're right. You're not doing a thing. You just sit here day after day drinking yourself into a stupor.’

‘What do you care? All you ever think about is your work.’

‘That's not true! I care about you! I care about us!’

‘We'll talk about it later.’

‘No, we'll talk about it now!’

‘All right, then. Do you really want to know what's wrong? I'm bored, Jean-Claude. Bored with Dakar. Bored with life.’

‘And the migraines? The way you rave and mutter in your sleep? Is that because you're bored?’

‘Perhaps.’

‘And what about me? Are you bored with me too?’

‘I've always been bored with you.’

Jean-Claude felt something snap inside him. He slapped her face with such force that her head snapped back. He watched with near disbelief as a trickle of blood oozed from her lip and spilled down her chin.

Adrienne put her hand to her mouth and wiped away a smear of the blood, stared at the red smear on her fingers with something like disbelief.

‘Oh, God,’ Jean-Claude whispered. ‘I'm sorry.’

He fell to his knees in front of her. He pulled a large white handkerchief from his pocket and tried to wipe the blood off her mouth.

Adrienne pushed him away. ‘Please Jean-Claude. Leave me alone. There is nothing to be done. Just leave me alone now.’

‘Why are you tormenting me like this?’

‘Because you're here,’ Adrienne said and got back to her feet and left him on his knees on the veranda.

♦ ♦ ♦

The python was sleeping in the shade of a cypress tree, near the mudhole where the hippopotamus lived. Its massive coils curled around itself made it appear like a garden hose carelessly discarded. Valentine crept closer through the scrub, for a better view.

The beauty of the creature took her breath away. She was fascinated by the slick brown sheen of the scales, the sinuous power of its body. She crouched on her haunches, watching, hardly daring to breathe.

The hard white ground burned her bare feet and she fidgeted against the discomfort. She was so very close, the closest she had ever come to a fully grown one.

Of course, the creature was far too big for her collection. She wondered how long its body might be, with those massive coils unwound. Twenty-five feet, perhaps more.

She shivered at the delicious thrill of being so close.

She took another crouching step forward. One of her toes caught the sharp edge of a stone and she fell forward onto her knees.

The serpent sensed, rather than heard, the vibrations. Immediately it uncoiled itself and slithered away through the tall grass.

‘*Zut!*’ She slapped her hand on the ground in frustration and then bent to examine her toe. Blood oozed out from under the toenail.

She got up and hobbled back to the villa. The sun was already low over Bernard Bay; it must be later than she thought.

She hoped her papa was not home yet. He got so upset when she went off alone.

Poor father. He worried too much.

♦ ♦ ♦

The sun lay flat on the sea, a bloated ochre ball. Valentine limped across the garden, favoring her injured foot. There was no sign of Jean-Claude. With any luck he was working late at the office again.

But as she darted around the side of the house, hoping to slip unnoticed through the kitchen, she heard him bark at her from the shuttered window of the drawing room. The cream shutter banged open and he leaned out, his face flushed pink with fury.

‘Valentine! Come here!’

She stopped and slunk back, avoiding his eyes. ‘What's wrong, Papa?’

‘Where have you been?’

‘I'm sorry I'm late, Papa. I promise I won't—’

‘You are supposed to stay in your room after school and do your homework!’

Valentine tried not to smile. Papa looked faintly ridiculous when he was angry, like an irritable mouse. She knew he would not stay mad at her for long and she loved him dearly for it.

‘Yes, papa.’

‘I've told you before about wandering off on your own! There are some dangerous snakes in the long grass around here. How many times do I have to warn you?’

‘*Desolé, Papa.*’

Already his anger had spent itself. He sighed. ‘You've hurt yourself,’ he said.

Valentine looked down; blood still oozed from her big toe.

‘You should be more careful,’ he told her. Then, in a gentler voice. ‘Come inside, we'll put something on it. Hurry. You must get dressed for dinner.’

♦ ♦ ♦

The evening meal was the time of day that Valentine hated the most. Adrienne rarely rose before noon so at breakfast she had her father all to herself. She ate her lunch at school. The evening meal was the only time the three of them were together.

They sat in silence as Jemal spooned aromatic chicken and rice on the white china plates. Valentine fidgeted with the lace border of the tablecloth, the starched white cotton of her dress biting the skin under her arms.

‘Sit up straight, Valentine,’ Jean-Claude reminded her.

She was sitting opposite her mother at the long cedar table. She noticed that tonight there was too much rouge on her mother’s cheeks and her lipstick was smeared into the corners of her mouth. Adrienne picked up the bottle of Burgundy and poured herself another glass. Some of the wine splashed on to the tablecloth, the stain blossoming quickly.

‘Don't you think you've had enough?’ Jean-Claude said.

‘You know I like a glass of wine with my dinner,’ Adrienne answered. ‘Don't be such a bore.’

Valentine picked up her heavy silver knife and fork and started to bolt down the chicken. If she finished her dinner quickly she could escape to her room on the pretext of doing her homework.

‘Valentine has been playing in the bush again,’ Jean- Claude said.

‘Let her do what she wants.’

‘It's dangerous,’ Jean-Claude said. ‘I expect you to be able to control her when I am not here.’

‘Oh for goodness sake, leave the child alone. Did you have a good day at school, *chèrie?*’

Valentine nodded, her head down. She hated it when they fought. She tried to think of something to say, to make them forget their squabbles.

‘What is mixed blood?’ she said.

There was a sudden, shocked silence. Valentine knew she had said something terrible, but she could not understand what it was.

Jean-Claude stared at his wife, ashen. Adrienne pushed her plate away. She had barely touched her food. ‘I think I'll go to bed,’ she said. She gripped the edge of the table for balance as she got to her feet and weaved towards the doorway.

Jean-Claude and Valentine sat in silence and listened to her retreating footsteps on the stairs.

‘What's wrong. papa?’

He forced a weak smile. ‘Where did you hear that expression, Valentine? Mixed blood.’

‘One of the boys at school. André Gondet. He was teasing me. He said his father had told him that I had mixed blood.’

‘Just ignore him. It doesn't mean anything. He was just being silly, that’s all.’

That night as Valentine lay in her room, watching the breeze play with the curtains through the French windows, she thought about it again and wondered why Jean-Claude had lied to her. She sensed that it had something to do with her mother.

CHAPTER 10

The following Sunday Jean-Claude and Valentine went to Mass. They went every Sunday, Valentine wearing her best white frock and carrying a parasol to keep off the sun. Sometimes they went by pony and trap, but usually Jean-Claude preferred to walk.

Adrienne had not been to Mass with them for a long, long time and Jean-Claude had long ago ceased asking her to accompany them.

It was a clear day with a sun-washed blue sky. The road back from the church crossed the park near the Palais de Justice and led to the pathway along the cliffs above Madeleine Beach.

Valentine recognized a group of children sitting under the trees, some of them were her classmates from the French school. Most of them were friends of André, the boy who had been teasing her. She gripped her father's hand a little tighter.

André wasn't with them; she later decided he must have been hiding behind the bushes waiting for them. He rushed out, whooping like a banshee, a white sheet wrapped around him like a skirt, his face blackened with boot polish.

'Valentine's a nigger!' he chanted. 'Valentine's a nigger!'

He danced up and down in front of her while the other children cheered and laughed. Valentine felt her face blush to the roots of her hair with shock and embarrassment.

Jean-Claude took a long time to react. Perhaps the sheer audacity of it took him by surprise. By the time he went after him, it was too late. André had scampered off, the rest of his mates scattering in all directions, leaving Jean-Claude staring helplessly after them, banging his walking cane against the ground in frustration.

'*Petits salauds!*' he screamed after them. 'You little bastards!'

Valentine had never heard her father swear before. She lowered her eyes.

When Jean-Claude came back his face was white, and he was shaking with anger and humiliation. He snatched up her hand and marched her back to the villa.

Valentine had to run to keep up with him.

It wasn't until they were home that he let her go, and stamped inside. Valentine took off her white glove and rubbed her hand; he had gripped it so tight all the blood had drained from her fingers.

She found him in the garden at the back of the house, slumped in a wicker chair. He was crying, tears dripping off the end of his nose. It was the first time she had ever seen him cry. She was crushed.

‘Papa ...’

‘I'm sorry, Valentine, I'm sorry ...’

‘Please, papa, don't cry ... ‘

‘I'm so sorry!’

Valentine was astounded how such a stupid, childish prank could have wounded him so deeply. For her own part she was embarrassed, but not hurt. She did not really understand how André Gondet mattered so much. What mattered was that it had hurt her papa.

She laid a hand on her father's shoulder and felt her childhood disappear as she absorbed his pain. As she patted him her heart burned with a terrible flame. She swore she would make André pay for doing this to her father.

And she knew just the way to do it.

♦ ♦ ♦

She arranged to meet him under one of the acacia trees in the garden. A fresh ocean breeze blew across the Plateau from Bernard Bay. Goree Island stood sentinel among the whitecaps in a sea of metallic blue.

The bright sun beating on the whitewashed villas of Cap Manuel hurt the eyes and Valentine had to squint to see him coming. He shuffled towards her from the dusty road, his hands thrust into the deep pockets of his shorts.

‘What's the matter?’ he said. ‘Are you still mad about the other day? It was just a joke.’

‘It doesn't bother me,’ Valentine said.

‘Really?’ He looked disappointed. ‘What did you want to see me about?’

Valentine looked at the ground. ‘Have you ever kissed a girl before?’

He took a long time to answer. Finally: ‘Lots of times.’

‘Will you kiss me?’

André took his hands out of his shorts. ‘Here?’

‘No, someone will see. This way.’ She grabbed him by the arm. ‘Come on.’

♦ ♦ ♦

The cellar was cool and smelled of mold. The stone steps that led down from the garden felt cool under her bare feet. The only light down here was filtered through the cracks in the heavy cedar door and the tiny grilled window set high in the stone wall.

André baulked at the top of the stairs. ‘It's creepy,’ he said.

‘Are you scared?’

‘Of course not.’

‘Come on then.’

He hesitated, then followed her down. ‘What is this place?’

‘It's the cellar. See, that's Papa's wine stacked along that wall. But he never comes down here. Only Jemal. He won't tell.’

‘Tell what?’

Valentine took André's hand and led him to the far end of the cellar. Something stirred in the blackness, and there was a faint rustling sound, like leaves blowing across a wooden porch.

André stopped, his eyes still not accustomed to the gloom after the bright sunlight. He made out what appeared to be a number of boxes stacked against the wall. Valentine stooped down next to one of them.

André realized that they weren’t boxes, they were cages, and they contained living, moving things. He wanted to run but he wasn’t going to let a girl frighten him.

He took a step closer.

‘You've got snakes in there!’

‘They're beautiful aren't they …?’ Valentine whispered.

He gasped. He recognized that dark satiny sheen, his father had pointed them out to him in the market. He sucked in his breath in alarm. ‘*Putain!* Valentine, that one's a mamba!’

She grinned at him in the darkness. ‘*T’as peur?*’

‘I’m not scared. I’m just saying. How the hell did you get a mamba?’

‘I caught him myself. He was asleep under the banyan tree. I used a forked stick to trap his head.’

‘Liar!’

‘It’s true. I won't keep him always. I'll let him go soon. I just like to come down here and stare at him. He's so strong, so beautiful. Don't you think so?’

‘Yes, and if it bites you, you're dead. That's how beautiful it is.’

Valentine stood up suddenly and opened one of the cages. She put her hand inside and came towards him, two small orange eyes glinting between her fingers. André thought he was going to wet himself. She had one of the damned things in her hand!

‘What are you doing?’

‘I'm going to teach you a lesson.’

‘I don't understand, I …’

‘You aren’t going to make fun of me in front of my father ever again!’

‘Valentine! I told you, it was just a joke ...’

‘Good. You've had your laugh. Now I'll have mine.’

He stumbled backwards and fell on his back. ‘Valentine!’ It came out shrill, echoing around the cellar and up through the house. ‘Valentine, please!’

She stood over him. He knew he was helpless. The snake’s head danced in front of his eyes and he saw its tongue flick out, as if it wanted to taste him first.

‘Papa cried, that's how funny your little joke was. He sat in the garden and cried and cried and cried.’

‘Stop it! Please! I'm sorry! Take it away … Valentine, don't!’

Suddenly Jean-Claude's voice echoed around the cellar. ‘Valentine!’

She looked up and saw her father silhouetted in the doorway. André saw his opportunity. He clambered to his feet and scampered away.

‘What in God's name are you doing, *ma'mselle!*’

Valentine took the snake back to its cage and dropped it inside, slamming the lid.

‘*Zut!*’ she whispered to herself. ‘I'm in deep water now!’

♦ ♦ ♦

When Adrienne had announced that she was pregnant, just a few weeks after they were married, Jean-Claude was stunned. For if Adrienne had brought a secret to the marriage, so had he. A childhood glandular

disease had left him sterile, but he had baulked at telling her, afraid that she might refuse the marriage, even in her straitened circumstance.

So, if he was going to ever have a child, it was always going to be someone else's.

Jean-Claude was a practical man. If Adrienne was damaged goods, so was he. He knew what he was getting into. What was unexpected, when the doctors ushered him into the white-painted hospital room where Adrienne lay exhausted on the bed, was his sheer joy at the first glimpse of his daughter. She was exquisite beyond belief. He really didn't care what Adrienne had done nine months before to conceive the child. She was his now.

And that was why the smile Jean-Claude offered Adrienne in the labor ward that night was absolutely genuine.

He displayed her proudly to all his friends, though no one else was allowed to hold her. If anyone ever frowned at the color of her skin, he never noticed. He fretted over her constantly. She would only have to utter the smallest cry from her white bassinet and he would be there, scooping her up in his arms to comfort her. He would sit with her for hours and gaze at the honey-brown skin and silky black hair and marvel at the unlikely circumstances that had contrived to give him such a beautiful daughter.

It was some consolation for the inexplicable transformation that had overtaken the woman he loved. He had long ago stopped asking the fates why his once beautiful wife had been transformed into a plump and frowsy alcoholic, why she could no longer speak even a few words to him without insult. He learned instead to live only for Valentine, his 'little angel'.

But now, as he stood in his study, he wondered at this little angel whom he had found, just a few minutes before, waving a snake in the face of a school friend. 'Well, what have you got to say for yourself?'

'I'm sorry papa,' Valentine mumbled.

'Sorry? Sorry? You held a snake at that boy's face!'

'It was a baby rock python. It wouldn't have hurt him. I keep it as a pet.'

'He didn't know that!'

Valentine grinned. 'No, he didn't. Peed in his pants, didn't he?'

Jean-Claude took a deep breath, trying to control himself. Her contrition was entirely feigned, he realized. 'How long have you had those . . . those reptiles under the house?'

‘You won't make me let them go?’

‘I asked you how long?’

‘I can't remember. I never keep any of them longer than six months.’

Jean-Claude shut his mind to the enormity of what she had just told him. The dangers his daughter had exposed herself to did not bear thinking about. ‘Some of those snakes are deadly poisonous. There's a black mamba in one of those cages and—’

‘I know. It's my favorite. He's beautiful.’

Jean-Claude had never heard anyone call a mamba beautiful. ‘It's the deadliest snake in Africa.’

‘I'm very careful with them. Jemal showed me how to catch them. You have to use a special kind of stick.’

‘I don't want to know,’ Jean-Claude spluttered. ‘What were you doing with that boy? Tell me.’

‘I'm sorry. I really am. I did it for you.’

For me?’

He was the one making fun of me in the park the other day. He made you cry. I won't let anyone do that!’

Jean-Claude’s anger was snuffed away, like a candle flame. ‘Oh, Valentine,’ he said. ‘What are we to do with you?’

♦ ♦ ♦

When Jean-Claude walked into the bedroom he found Adrienne lying on the bed, still in her dressing gown, sipping white wine and gazing stupidly at a magazine. It was exactly what she had been doing when he had left that morning.

She had been so beautiful once, so lovely, so assured. He tried to think, as he had so many times before, when it was that it had all changed between them. If he was honest with himself, he knew that it had never been any different. The change had begun before they were married. Whatever had happened to her in Saigon had followed her to Dakar, and the clear blue skies of the African colony had done nothing to heal whatever it was that troubled her. He remembered the stories that had been whispered about her in Saigon and now he cursed himself for a fool for having ignored them.

He had tried to talk to her about it many times, but she just got upset, sometimes even hysterical; he had told himself that it would pass in time.

But it only became worse.

Now he felt overcome by a sense of loss. He sat down on the edge of the bed.

‘My love,’ he whispered.

Adrienne peered up at him. She seemed unable to focus properly. My God, he thought. Has she been drunk all day?

‘What is it?’

He took her hand. It was cold. ‘Do you still love me ... a little?’

‘I'm not in the mood for that tonight, Jean-Claude—’

‘No, I don’t mean that. She knows, Adrienne. I had to tell her. Just now. The children are teasing her at school and ...’

‘What? I don't understand. What are you talking about?’

‘Valentine! I told her! I told her that I am not her real father.’

Adrienne caught her breath. ‘You fool.’

‘Am I?’

‘So? She's not yours. Why did you have to tell her that?’

‘She has a right to know. She’s old enough. Who is the father?’

‘I don't remember.’

Jean-Claude grabbed her shoulders and shook her. The wine spilled on to the bed sheet. ‘Adrienne! Stop it! All right, so you had a child by another man! It doesn't matter to me now! It never mattered to me! So, he was … colored. I don't care!’

‘What difference does it make whether you care or not?’

He let her go, buried his face in his hands. It was pointless. ‘We'll be going back to France soon.’

‘I don't want to go to France. I like it here.’

‘The *Dakarois* will have Independence this year. The administration is to be dismantled. I have told you before, it is not my decision. I must go where they send me.’

‘Yes, of course. Run, Jean-Claude. Stand still, Jean- Claude. Jump through the hoop, Jean-Claude.’

‘It never bothered you before! Jumping through hoops got us this villa!’ He fought down his anger and patted her hand, hoping to soothe her next response. ‘Perhaps it will be as well. They have good doctors in France. We could go to Paris and—’

‘Why do we need a doctor? We're not sick ...’

‘For you, Adrienne. There are doctors in Paris who understand the mind and ...’

‘You think I'm mad, don't you? There's nothing wrong with me! It's you! You made me do it!’

She tried to claw his face and Jean-Claude fled to the other side of the room. ‘What are you talking about? Made you do what?’

‘Get out of here!’ She picked up the wine glass and aimed it at his head. Instead it smashed harmlessly against the wall. ‘Get out!’

‘Please, Adrienne—’

‘Get out of here, damn you!’

Jean-Claude went out, shutting the door gently behind him. He could hear muffled sobs from inside the bedroom as Adrienne wept into her pillow. Shaken, he slipped away and had one of the servants make up a bed in one of the other rooms.

♦ ♦ ♦

Adrienne watched the shadows creep across the room. A mosquito whined at the netting above her head.

‘Michel,’ Adrienne whispered into the gathering darkness, ‘please forgive me.’

Was he alive? No. More likely dead, starved, in a Saigon street somewhere, years ago.

‘I killed him. I left him to die.’

Her eyes went to the crucifix on the wall. Hanging there in the half-light the face of Christ twisted into a snarl of contempt. There was no forgiveness there. She had not even made her Confession in the church. Better that there was no absolution, really. She wanted to suffer. She deserved it.

‘I abandoned my own son.’

She had given him up for this life of ease and luxury. How ironic that things had turned out this way after all. She thought she could leave Saigon behind, but it had followed her here just the same. Now she just wanted to sleep, forever, and never have to face herself again.

‘Oh, Michel. What happened to you?’

Yes, she deserved her torment. And Jean-Claude. Why didn't he leave her? How could he bear to stay like this? It was impossible not to torment

him, for he was the reason she left her son. He had offered a way out and she could never forgive him for that.

‘Oh, Michel, please forgive me.’

The room faded to darkness and Adrienne closed her eyes.

CHAPTER 11

Saigon

Saigon had become a whore of a city. It had shone the shoes of the Japanese and the French soldiers and sold them its women, and the war had fed the burgeoning population, its *cyclopousse* drivers, its beggars, its tailors and forgers of ancient works of art.

Once it had been a city of bicycles. Now they had been replaced with Vespas and Lambrettas, army lorries and tanks. Graffiti appeared on the white-painted stucco walls of the city: ‘support president diem!’

Like any whore, Saigon used her charm to conceal deeper miseries. Along the broad tree-lined boulevards of the Rue Catinat - now renamed the Tu Do - strolled beautiful Vietnamese women, stunning in sheath-tight *ao-dai*, beside saffron-robed monks, walking with graceful and measured tread. But beyond the flowered gardens and the lavender and cream walls of the old colonial French villas lay the shanties and the cardboard shacks and the *bui doi*, the street urchins who hung at every corner, or swarmed outside the hotels and markets with outstretched hands, a generation of orphaned and abandoned children without homes, without food, and without hope.

♦ ♦ ♦

Michel was thirteen years old. Already he knew enough of four languages: French, English, Vietnamese and *chiu chao*, the Chinese dialect of Cholon. In addition to these skills he was also an expert shoplifter and pocket thief. He could slit open a shopping bag with a razor to take a purse, and snatch shopping bags from the back of moving Hondas around the markets in Ham Nghi street. He had his own network of fences and was on friendly terms with half a dozen black-market dealers. The street was his home.

He was already a head taller than No Name and the other Vietnamese boys his own age. He was thin, but the spare muscles of his body were hard and taut as rope. He wore a Brooklyn Dodgers baseball cap and a white T-

shirt, with a packet of Lucky Strike cigarettes tucked under the left sleeve. He kept a Zippo lighter and a flick knife in the back pocket of his shorts.

His coffee skin and smooth features helped him to blend into his background, and only his height hinted at his European blood. But his most memorable feature was his eyes; they seemed not quite evenly matched. This gave the impression that the two sides of his face had been minted separately and then brought together. The effect was disturbing and hypnotic.

‘Look what I scored today,’ he said. He reached into the voluminous pockets of his US army-issue shorts and took out a heavy Rolex with a chunky silver band.

No Name whistled softly. ‘Where did you get it, huh?’

‘A big American outside the Caravelle. Took it straight off his wrist and ran like the wind.’

Three Finger emptied his wicker basket on the ground. There were six bars of Lux soap, a dozen tins of Carnation milk and some tubes of Colgate toothpaste. ‘I went to the refugee camp. Here, look. A gift from the people of America.’

Tiger Eye reached into the blouse pocket of her khaki shirt and threw some crumpled blue notes on to the ground. No Name picked them up and examined them critically. ‘Make them pay you in dollars.’

Tiger Eye snatched them back. ‘You want dollars, you fuck them.’

Three Finger scooped up the soap and the toothpaste. ‘I'm going to sell these in the market.’

Michel tossed the watch into the basket. ‘Here. Sell this for me too.’

No Name nodded his head towards Dinh, who lay on his back under a lean-to of corrugated iron and matting, set against the crumbling wall of the building. He was moaning. A rat bite on his thigh had become infected. This morning it was swollen and hot and a scabrous crust had formed over the wound. A custard-yellow putrefaction oozed from beneath.

‘Perhaps we can buy some medicine for Dinh, huh?’ No Name said.

‘We'll get him some pills from the refugee camp,’ Michel said.

‘That's just for head devils. We need stronger medicine.’

‘Medicine's expensive. We need food more.’

No Name spat into the dirt. ‘Sometimes,’ he said slowly, ‘you talk like a round eye.’

‘Sometimes,’ Michel answered him, ‘you talk like an old woman.’

‘We have to look after each other.’

‘He's going to die. Why waste money on him?’

No Name shook his head. ‘I was wrong about you. You'll never be one of us. I should have left you in Van Trang.’

‘If it wasn't for me, you'd still be there.’

No Name jumped to his feet. A knife appeared in his hand. ‘I say we buy medicine.’

Michel stood up slowly. He towered over the little Tonkinese. He reached into his shorts and took out his switchblade. ‘I say we don't.’

They started to circle each other, and the others backed off to give them room.

A hollow boom shook the ground under their feet. Both boys turned, startled, forgetting their fight.

‘That was close,’ Michel murmured.

No Name slipped the knife away. ‘Let's go.’

The bar was a favorite haunt of American engineers from the Caravelle. But the grenade mesh across the windows had been little help this time; a Viet Cong had left a *plastique* under one of the tables. When Michel and No Name arrived, the street was still littered with bodies, and the air was filled with the terrible moans of the injured. Ambulance bells clanged in the distance.

Flames licked at the blackened embers. The whole ground floor of the building had been blown out, the walls peeling outwards and raining bricks and masonry into the shops either side.

A green ARVN jeep arrived and one of the soldiers began to cordon off the area with plastic ribbons.

‘We'll wait,’ Michel said.

♦ ♦ ♦

That evening the children picked their way through the rubble, like jackals after a kill. Three Finger found a watch. The steel band was warped and twisted, and the glass face was smashed but the mechanism still worked. He would be able to sell it at the market for a few piastres. Tiger Eye found a disembodied finger and slipped the thin gold band from the bloodied relic into her shorts.

The apothecary next to the café was deserted, one wall blown away, shelves and drawers smashed and splintered among the rubble. Michel picked his way through it, his hands raw and blistered from pulling at the timbers and bricks, which were blackened but still fire-hot.

The *bac si* had catered to the American as well as the traditional market. Among the broken jars and bottles of dried herbs and desiccated insects and plants, Michel found a store of Western medicines, little vials of pills with long indecipherable names. He put half a dozen bottles in the voluminous pockets of his khaki shorts.

When they got back to their makeshift shelter, Michel tossed them on to the tiny pile of treasure they had salvaged.

‘Medicine for Dinh,’ Michel said.

No Name weighed one of the bottles in the palm of his hand. ‘Mandrax,’ he read, slowly. ‘What does it do, huh?’

Michel shrugged. ‘It's medicine.’

No Name unscrewed the cap and poured some of the white pills into his palm. ‘How many shall we give him?’

‘Two,’ Tiger Eye said. ‘At the refugee camp they always make you take two.’

‘But Dinh's very sick,’ Three Finger said. ‘Better make it four.’

♦ ♦ ♦

The smoke from their fire drifted upwards. The shadows under the skeletal walls of the godown broadened and deepened.

‘His leg's worse,’ No Name said. ‘It stinks. The skin around the scab looks green. The medicine didn't work.’

‘Let's give him something else,’ Three Finger said. He was holding another one of the little glass bottles. ‘What about these?’

No Name took them from him. ‘Co-deine. Sure. Why not?’

‘Is he still asleep?’ Tiger Eye said.

No Name nodded.

‘Maybe he's dying.’

‘Or maybe it was the medicine,’ Michel said. ‘The Americans have pills that make you go to sleep.’

‘If he doesn't wake up soon, we can't give him any more of the tablets,’ No Name said.

Michel stared into the fire. ‘It must be very strong medicine. He's been asleep for nearly two days.’

‘It's no good if all it does is make you sleep. Throw it away.’

Michel shook his head. ‘Sometimes you can be so stupid.’

‘All right, Round Eye, you're so smart. What good is this Man-drax to us?’

Michel grinned and told him.

♦ ♦ ♦

Tiger Eye called it turning tricks. She had No Name or Three Finger pimp for her on the street, hitting on the passing parade of crew cut American engineers and contractors in Hawaiian shirts or badly fitting MACV greens. The transaction would be finalized in an alley, and then she would take them to a small Chinese hotel, where she would pay for a room at an hourly rate.

The Americans were big and heavy and they hurt, but it was easier than stealing and if she pretended to be a virgin they paid her twice as much. They liked her to scream a little and sometimes she didn't have to pretend. But some of them were kind to her also and gave her Camel cigarettes and Hershey Bars and bottles of Coca-Cola.

It had been Michel's idea to raise the stakes in the game. She watched him work the street and after a few minutes he brought her a customer. He found him eating noodles at one of the cafés.

‘Hey, Mister, you want to sleep with my sister? Number one girl. Tight pussy.’

The American picked at the remains of his lunch with a small wooden toothpick. ‘Is this number one girl your little sister or your grandmother?’

Although Michel could speak English perfectly he affected the stilted patois of the street. He found it was good for business if the Americans thought he was just another hustler. ‘Very young. Number one. Come and see.’ He tugged at the man's shirt. It had electric-yellow bananas and bright orange pineapples overlaid on a bed of green palm trees.

‘How much?’

‘Come and see. Number one girl. This way, Mister.’

The man followed Michel into the alley. Tiger Eye was leaning against the wall. Her arms and legs looked as fragile as twigs. The hooded eyes

stared back at the American with casual indifference.

The American stopped, surprised. He took the toothpick out of his mouth and ran a hand through his thinning, ginger hair. ‘How old is she?’

Tiger Eye was thirteen and told her customers she was sixteen. Michel watched the American's small pink tongue flicking between his moist red lips, like a lizard sizing up its next meal. Something told him this man was different from most of the others. ‘She's eleven,’ he said.

The man pushed past him and put one huge hand on Tiger Eye's small breast. ‘Hell, she ain't hardly got any titties yet.’ It was not a rebuke; he seemed pleased.

Michel watched him. The man's pink scalp gleamed under the spare thatch of ginger curls. He was perhaps once a powerful man, but now his stomach lolled over the belt of his pants. He thought he could take him.

‘Your little sister a virgin?’

‘Of course.’

Tiger Eye went ahead to the hotel, the American shambling along behind her. Outside the hotel Michel gave Tiger Eye a bottle of Michelob beer and four of the Mandrax.

‘When you give him the beer, crush these up and slip them in the bottle,’ Michel whispered.

‘All right,’ Tiger Eye said. She looked nervous.

‘And don't forget to make a noise. You're supposed to be a virgin.’

Tiger Eye shook her head, offended. ‘Don’t tell me my business. I know what to do. I've been a virgin more times than you could count.’

♦ ♦ ♦

When Tiger Eye came out of the hotel an hour later there was a curious bulge at her waist and her eyes glistened with excitement. She had the American's wallet tucked inside her underpants.

They dashed into the side alley, and Tiger Eye hitched up her dress and pulled it out. Michel snatched it from her. ‘It worked!’ Michel said. It was all he could think of to say.

‘At first he didn't want the beer, but I made him drink it. I said it was a Vietnamese custom. Then he started pulling off his clothes.’ Tiger Eye grimaced. ‘He had a stomach like a whale. But would you believe it, his thing was like this.’ She held up her little finger, ‘Then he got on top of me

and I thought maybe we hadn't given him enough medicine. Then, you know, he just fell asleep. Right on top of me. I thought I was going to suffocate.'

While she spilled out her story Michel emptied the wallet on to his lap. There was a photograph of the American with a woman and two smiling girls with long, neatly combed brown hair. Not much older than Tiger Eye, Michel thought, surprised. There was some business cards and a membership to a private club in San Francisco. Michel tossed them into the alley.

He unzipped one of the pockets and a sheaf of American dollar bills and Vietnamese piastres tumbled out. Michel counted them quickly. 'Fifty-two United States dollars and two thousand piastres,' he breathed.

Tiger Eye banged the ground with her fists and giggled. Michel just shook his head in wonderment. Today he had learned two important lessons from life. The power of sex; and the power of American medicine.

CHAPTER 12

The graffiti said:

support only president diem . . . don't give information to the viet cong.

Below the wall two yellow-fanged cats squabbled and fought for scraps among a pile of rubbish. Three Finger picked up a half-brick and hurled it at them, sending them shrieking away along the alley.

Beside him, Tiger Eye cradled Dinh's head in her lap. Sweat shone on his face, soaking her dress. He tossed and moaned with the fever. Tiger Eye stroked his hair, rocking gently back and forward on her haunches.

‘His leg is rotten,’ No Name said. ‘We should take him to the hospital, huh?’

Michel lit a Lucky Strike, blowing the smoke from the side of the mouth as he saw some of the American soldiers do at the Caravelle. ‘Why? He's dead anyway.’

‘Maybe they can give him medicine,’ Tiger Eye said.

‘No, they won't. They'll just leave him in the corner to rot with all the others.’

‘We can't leave him like this.’

‘Why not?’

No Name spat on the ground. ‘You're a Number ten motherfucker, Round Eye.’

Michel shrugged. ‘I still say you're wasting your time.’

♦ ♦ ♦

The Nhi Dong Children's Hospital was on the Su Van Hahn near the racecourse. The street was heavy with the stench of rotting fruit and an occasional breath of wind carried with it the taint of the near-by fish market.

Michel waited in the street while the others carried Dinh into the hospital. He saw a man in a khaki uniform come out carrying a small bundle wrapped in a ragged blanket. An old Vietnamese woman in black pajamas was waiting patiently by the gates. The man held the bundle out to her. As she reached for it, the blanket fell away, and Michel saw it was the body of a teenage boy, probably about the same age as himself.

The woman took the corpse and walked away, cradling the child in her arms.

‘Might be you one day, huh?’

Michel whirled around. It was No Name.

‘No, I won't die. Not till I've evened the score.’

‘What score?’

‘You'll see.’

‘You're crazy, Round Eye. There's something wrong in your head.’

‘Maybe.’

‘Don't you want to know what happened to Dinh?’

‘No.’

Michel walked away. No Name stared after him. He turned to Three Finger and Tiger Eye and pointed to his temple.

Three Finger shrugged. Crazy, yes. But Michel was still the smartest and the biggest. They might need him someday.

They followed him back up the street.

♦ ♦ ♦

Dinh did not die. A few months later he was back on the street, another one-legged beggar among the city's hordes. He might have starved, but the band pooled everything they had and shared it out. Even Michel agreed to the arrangement. Besides, Tiger Eye was making more money than any of them, and she insisted that if the others wanted to pimp for her and share in the profits, then Dinh was to get an equal share.

Tiger Eye was almost fourteen years old now, rail-thin, small-boned, fragile as rice paper. But her oval face was astonishingly pretty; she had huge brown almond eyes, honey velvet skin and straight white teeth. She never bothered with the padded bras and stiletto heels that the other street girls wore. She knew that there were some men who liked young girls and already, even before puberty, she was lying about her age.

She told her customers she was twelve.

One night Michel waited for her in the alley beside the Eighty Eight Hotel in Cholon. She was with one of her regulars, a small, owl-eyed catering contractor from Texas. Michel was impatient. The man always brought extra gifts as well as cash, and he was eager to see what they had scored.

An hour later Tiger Eye sauntered down the alley carrying a heavy cane basket.

Michel grabbed it off her shoulder. ‘What did you get?’

‘That crazy motherfucker,’ she said. He noticed a fleck of blood on her lip. ‘Slaps me around then crawls on the floor in his underpants and tells me he's sorry. Then he shows me photographs of his children in America. I tell him - that's the last time. I don't need number ten cocksucker like him.’

Michel wasn't listening. He tipped the contents of the basket on to the ground. There were a dozen Hershey bars, half a dozen packets of Lucky Strike cigarettes, two bottles of Seven-Up and a half bottle of Jack Daniels whiskey.

‘How much did he pay you?’

Tiger Eye hitched up the long army-issue khaki T-shirt she wore as a dress, put her hand down the front of her white cotton pants and pulled out a bundle of notes. She threw them at Michel.

‘Look at all this! Worth a fat lip any day.’

‘Let's go back. I don't want to turn any more tricks tonight. Must be close to curfew.’

Michel started to throw everything back into the basket. ‘What's it like?’

‘What?’

‘Screwing these guys. Do you like it?’

‘It used to hurt. Now I don't feel anything.’ She cocked her head to one side. ‘Ever done it, Round Eye?’

Michel looked away. ‘Sure. Yeah.’

‘Want to do it to me?’

His mouth went suddenly dry.

‘Want to boom-boom my sister, Mister?’ she said, imitating him. ‘Number one girl. Very clean, virgin.’ She snatched the basket out of his hand and dropped it on the ground. She spun him around so her back was against the wall. ‘Take your pants down.’

Michel could see the cars and bicycles on the Tu Do, heard an American's voice booming over the din in the street.

‘No one can see us,’ Tiger Eye hissed at him. ‘Are you scared?’

Michel eased down his shorts. He gasped with shock as Tiger Eye's fingers clamped around his penis.

‘You're soft.’

He didn't know what to say. He knew what he was supposed to do but he couldn’t do it. He leaned in to kiss her, but Tiger Eye turned her face away. He felt her tug and knead at his penis. It hurt.

He heard the sampan horns out on the Saigon River. He was suddenly aware of the alley smell of rubbish, kerosene and urine.

He placed a tentative hand to her chest, felt the swollen lump of her nipple against her ribs. He felt his chest growing tight and a burning ache in his groin.

‘That's better,’ Tiger Eye whispered. She slipped down her pants. ‘You'll have to hold me up.’

Michel put his hands under her armpits and lifted her easily. He was amazed how light she was. Tiger Eye put her legs around his waist and then reached down with her right hand and guided him inside her.

‘Push. Come on, push! Push!’

‘Is that all right?’

‘Yes, yes,’ the girl whispered. ‘It's nice and small. The Americans are too big. They hurt me.’

Michel was stung by the comparison. Angry, he began to push into her as hard as he could. He gasped at these new sensations. This felt good.

He found himself thinking of a small room above the Rue Le Loi, of a hard wooden cot and a sewing table, long bolts of cloth under the window. He saw the dark sheen of sweat on his father's back, and he saw his mother, her face contorted into a grimace with this same pleasure-pain, her lips working in a silent scream.

Adrienne.

But when he opened his eyes it wasn't her. It was just a skinny little Vietnamese girl, her eyes half-closed in concentration and Michel felt an upwelling of rage such as he had never known in his life.

♦ ♦ ♦

No Name was ecstatic. He had hung around outside the Cafe Givral all night, waiting for his opportunity. He watched a fat American in a tropical suit sitting at one of the tables getting drunk on Martell brandy and every time he pulled out his wallet he could see thick wads of American greenbacks and Vietnamese piastres.

When the man staggered outside he barely felt the bump as No Name ran into him. It wasn't until he got in the back seat of his taxi that he realized what had happened and by then No Name was two blocks away.

No Name made his way to the Eighty Eight Hotel to share his good fortune. He found Michel standing at the end of the alley with Tiger Eye's cane basket over his shoulder.

‘Round Eye! Ask me how much money I scored tonight! Huh? Fifty American dollars and five thousand piastres! Huh?’

Michel didn't seem to hear him. He looked dazed.

‘Hey Round Eye! You all right? You been smoking *ma thuy* huh?’

‘I'm all right.’

‘Where's Tiger Eye? Turning a trick, huh?’

‘Tiger Eye?’

‘What's the matter with you, huh? Hey, snap out of it!’

‘She's hurt.’

‘Hurt? What are you talking about? Where is she?’

Michel looked down the alley. No Name pushed him away and ran down there.

‘Holy fucking shit!’

Tiger Eye lay slumped against the wall. It was dark, and he couldn’t see her face. He bent down and put out a hand to touch her, immediately pulled it away again as if he’d been stung.

There was a warm, sticky mess on his fingers.

‘It was her American trick,’ Michel said. ‘He came out of the hotel after her. He said she stole his money. He just went crazy. I couldn't stop him.’

‘Fucking Number ten round eye cocksuckers!’

‘He just kept hitting her.’

No Name fumbled for her pulse, then put his ear against her bony chest.

‘Shall we take her to the hospital?’ Michel said.

‘What's the point, huh? She's dead.’

No Name stood up. ‘Why didn't you use your knife?’

Michel didn’t answer. No Name shook his head. What was the point of having a big bastard like Michel around if he couldn't protect them when they needed it? Maybe he was all bluff. Maybe he was just a coward after all.

‘Okay. Come on, leave her,’ he said. ‘It's back to stealing handbags for the rest of us.’

CHAPTER 13

By the time Michel was seventeen, the angular youth had become a lean and attractive young man. He oozed sexuality in the way that he moved; he was tall and sinuous, and he dressed well. No one who saw him in the street would have guessed that he was *bui doi*. His frame and features were European; his skin and liquid brown eyes were Asian. Like a chameleon he moved easily from the cafés in the French quarter to the Chinese slums of Cholon.

He became aware of the way that some women looked at him; one morning outside the Caravelle Hotel, he discovered that he had other talents besides bag-snatching and picking pockets.

♦ ♦ ♦

The Caravelle was nine stories of concrete and glass. Polished stone steps led up to a foyer furnished in mock-Oriental plastic. The hotel was patronized by the Americans, who preferred its gaudy charms to the more traditional comforts of the Continental Hotel just across the square.

Their presence attracted Michel and No Name. One day Michel was sitting on his Vespa at the curbside, smoking a cigarette and watching out for police while No Name worked the street outside, hawking *ma thuy* to the American soldiers.

He saw a girl sitting alone on the terrace, drinking coffee. She looked over at him and Michel grinned back.

She flushed and turned away.

She was a round eye; probably an American, Michel thought, if she's staying at the Caravelle. She wasn't pretty, but she was slim with striking curly black hair that flowed half way down her back. She wore a pink blouse and khaki-green slacks. A reporter, Michel guessed. All the American reporters sported at least one piece of army issue. Even the women.

As she came out of the hotel Michel waved at her. ‘Hi. You want a lift?’

She ignored him and walked off down the street. Michel left the scooter on its stand and followed her.

‘Hey, sexy!’

She wheeled around, her face crimson. ‘I don't want to buy anything.’

‘I'm not selling.’

‘Please go away.’

‘You're new in Saigon, aren't you?’

She bit her lip. ‘So?’

‘Nothing. You look scared, that's all. Like you need someone to show you around.’

‘Are you trying to pick me up?’

‘Maybe.’

The girl pushed back a wisp of hair from her face. A good sign, Michel thought. ‘How old are you?’ she asked him.

‘Nineteen,’ Michel lied.

‘Shouldn't you be in the army?’

‘Why? I'm not Vietnamese. I'm French.’

She turned away. ‘I don't let men pick me up in the street.’

‘Where do you want to be picked up? I'll meet you there.’

‘You got a lot of balls.’

He just grinned.

She hesitated. Then, to his astonishment, she said: ‘The Caravelle. Eleven o'clock.’

♦ ♦ ♦

She was nearly an hour late. Michel waited for her in the corner with a bottle of '33' beer. He was about to leave when she walked in, her face flushed and damp patches along the back of her blouse.

She smiled with relief when she saw him. ‘I was afraid you wouldn't wait.’

‘I would wait for ever for a pretty girl.’

She ignored the obvious deceit. ‘I was getting my accreditation. They tell me it takes even longer to get your MACV from the Embassy. Christ, it's hot.’

Michel ordered two more beers.

She pulled a packet of Lucky Strike from her bag and lit one, throwing back her head and blowing smoke in a long plume towards the ceiling. Michel watched her. She was a little older than he had thought at first,

perhaps twenty-five or twenty-six. She had a freckled nose and hazel-brown eyes. She looked nervous.

He lounged back against the wall.

‘I don't know your name,’ she said.

‘Michel.’

‘Mine's Susan. Susan Howard.’ She gave him a tight smile. ‘How did you know I'd just arrived here?’

‘I told you. You looked scared. Everyone looks scared when they first come to Saigon. It's all right. You'll get used to it.’

‘If you must know, it's my first overseas assignment. I've never been out of America before.’

‘That's okay. I've never been out of Saigon before.’

‘You were born here then?’

‘My father's French,’ Michel lied. ‘He has his business here.’

The beers arrived.

Susan took a long draught from her glass, her tongue licking away the froth on her upper lip. ‘I don't usually let guys pick me up on the street. I don't even know why I talked to you. Perhaps it's because I'm a long way from home.’

‘Perhaps.’

‘That doesn't mean I'm going to let you sleep with me.’

‘Of course not. It never crossed my mind.’

Two more beers, he thought. Two more beers and I’ll have her on her back.

♦ ♦ ♦

Michel padded out of the bathroom, still wet from the shower. He was naked except for the towel at his waist. This was his first time in a hotel room; he had never seen a bathroom that had running hot water. He was overawed by the luxury of it, by the feel of soft carpet under his bare feet, astonished by the chill of the air-conditioned rooms.

One day, he promised himself, one day I will live like this all the time; I will live in big hotels like this one, and sleep in soft sheets and take long showers whenever I want and look down on the streets instead of live on them.

One day.

Susan lay on her back, covered by a single cotton sheet. She stretched like a cat. ‘Hurry up,’ she murmured.

He sat down on the edge of the bed and held up the medicine bottle in his hand. ‘What's this?’

‘Jesus!’ She snatched it away from him. ‘Have you been going through the cabinet?’

‘Just curious.’

‘It's dye, okay?’

‘What's it for?’

She stared at him, not sure whether he was making fun of her. ‘It's for my hair. It's not really this color. It's ginger and I hate it.’ She grinned. ‘But you know that already.’ She put the bottle down on the bedside table, and the sheet fell away. Michel dropped his gaze to her body.

‘That's all right,’ he said. ‘I'm not really nineteen.’

He reached out and lazily cupped her breast in his hand, his thumb tracing the contour of her nipple. He pulled away the towel and eased himself on to the bed beside her.

Susan shuddered and lay back on the pillow, put her hand on top of his. ‘Don't make me regret this,’ she whispered.

♦ ♦ ♦

‘She's dead, Michel! She's dead!’

They were outside the main bus station on Petrusky Street. Michel had stolen a melon from the market and was perched on a low wall, carefully dissecting it with his pocket knife. He took a bite and wiped the juice off his mouth with the back of his hand. ‘Who's dead?’

‘That American journalist! The one you were talking to outside the Caravelle yesterday! They found her in her room and—’

‘Slow down. What are you talking about?’

‘She's dead, Michel! There's police swarming all over the hotel. Everyone's talking about it. She was strangled in her bed.’

Michel cut off another slice of melon with his knife.

‘So?’

‘So they're looking for you, motherfucker! Every fucking American journalist in Saigon saw you in the Caravelle with her. You're fucked, Michel!’

‘Don't look so happy about it.’

‘You didn't have to murder her, you idiot!’

‘There was one hundred dollars in her purse. And the watch and rings were worth another hundred. What was I supposed to do?’

‘Just take them. You didn't have to kill her, huh?’

‘I didn't mean to kill her. She was struggling, so I just tried to calm her down.’

Yes, she had struggled, Michel remembered. Even before his hands closed around her throat she guessed what he was going to do, and she had fought him with her fists and nails. But he was too strong for her and in the end it had all been very easy.

He remembered feeling her neck snap, like a twig.

He still wasn't sure what had made him do it, but he remembered that feeling of release. It was better than sex and its afterglow had stayed with him for hours, an almost trance-like serenity.

It was a shame about the girl, but she was a slut after all.

‘You can't murder an American in her room and get away with it,’ No Name said, ‘they'll turn the whole city upside-down to find you.’

‘Maybe.’

‘I always knew you were a dangerous motherfucker. I didn't think you were stupid.’

‘You're gibbering like an old woman.’

‘If you want to save your neck you'd better get out of Saigon.’

‘I'm not going anywhere.’ Michel hacked off another slice of melon. ‘Want some breakfast?’

No Name turned away. Well, he'd warned him. If the idiot was going to wait around for the police to find him, that was his problem. He didn't want to be around when they did.

♦ ♦ ♦

Later that afternoon No Name was back outside the Caravelle looking for customers. Two cigarette girls were squabbling with each other at the entrance, each claiming the territory as their own. He saw a crew-cut American walk out, pushing his way through the shoeshine boys, beggars and cripples hawking Capstan cigarettes and Juicy Fruit.

He fell into step beside him and affected the theatrical whisper that he used to add urgency to his pitch. ‘Hey, Mister . . . you want to buy smack, huh? Want to boom-boom my sister? What do you want, Mister, huh?’

The young man kept walking.

‘Hey, Mister, what do you want, huh?’

The man stopped and wheeled around. ‘I want you to look at me.’

No Name took a step back. What the hell was this?

The American took off his sunglasses and grinned. ‘Still think I should get out of Saigon?’

‘Jesus Christ! Round Eye!’

Michel ran his hand across the stubble on his scalp. ‘Didn’t you recognize me?’

‘How did you …?’

‘Amazing what a haircut can do. Then I put on a pair of sunglasses and a leisure suit and ordered a beer in the front bar. Not one of the stupid bastards looked twice at me. And they're all telling each other how they'd like to get their hands on the son of a bitch who murdered the girl. And I was standing right next to them!’

No Name shook his head. The transformation was incredible; but it was more than just the hair and the sunglasses. Michel had changed the language of his body, the set of his shoulders, the way he held his head, the way he walked. He had shrugged off his Asian blood like a serpent shedding its skin.

‘You went back to the same bar?’

‘I cursed that gook murdering cocksucker right along with them. I even bought one of the fat bastards a drink! Guess whose money it was!’

‘You're really crazy.’

‘I'm not crazy. I'm invisible. Here in Asia I can be whatever I like, East or West, whenever I want. It's my birthright.’

He laughed and walked away, disappeared among the press of bodies along the Tu Do, ignoring the street beggars who jostled and pulled at his shirt. No Name shuddered. He didn't give a damn about the American girl, but murder was a dangerous game to play. His round eye friend had raised the stakes. He wasn’t sure he could afford to play.

PART THREE

Birthright 1967-72

CHAPTER 14

August 1967,

Paris

‘Shhh!’ Valentine whispered, and fell heavily up the wooden stairs, shrieking with laughter.

‘*Merde alors!* Your father will hear us!'

The boy bent down and pulled her to her feet. Suddenly her arms were around his neck and he felt her warm, wine-sweet mouth on his. The kiss electrified him, and he groaned as his belly tightened and he was suddenly hard and ready for her.

He pushed her against the wall, but Valentine wriggled away and clambered, giggling, up the creaking wooden stairs to the top-floor apartment.

‘Valentine!’

A door edged open on one of the landings and a grey-haired woman in a black smock peered out. He wrinkled his nose at the smell of boiled cabbage and cheap scent. He hurried up the stairs after Valentine.

All that vin ordinaire they had drunk in the schoolyard slowed him own. By the time he caught up with her she was already at the top-floor landing fumbling for her key. She had stolen it that afternoon from her mother's purse.

‘Valentine!’.

She looked up, smiling, and he just stood there, his eyes pleading with her, clumsy and desperate and barely sixteen years old.

Valentine put her hands on his shoulders and kissed him again. I love you,’ he whispered, knowing he sounded utterly foolish.

The door to her apartment swung open, spilling light on to the landing. He pulled away, startled. *Bordel de merde!* he thought.

Valentine wheeled around and stamped her foot. ‘Father!’ She pushed him away, towards the stairs. ‘Go!’ she hissed. ‘*Allez!*’

He hesitated for only a moment, then took off. He looked back just once, from the second-floor landing, but already Valentine and her father had gone. He heard the apartment door slam.

♦ ♦ ♦

‘Do you know what time it is?’

‘I'm sorry, Papa.’

‘Sorry!’ He sniffed. ‘You've been drinking!’

‘Yes.’

Yes? Is that it? He wanted - no, he expected - her contrition. Jean-Claude had spent the last two hours pacing the floor of the apartment, frantic with worry. Instead her face betrayed neither remorse nor guilt. ‘Who was that boy?’

‘He is in my class at school.’

‘You're behaving like a slut!’

‘Don't you ever call me that!’

‘It's true! What do you think you were doing?’

‘We were kissing! That's all!’

‘You're only fifteen years old!’

‘So?’ She raised her chin at him in defiance. So much like her mother in so many ways; she looked like her - or how she used to look when he had first met her - and now she acted like her.

‘You are my daughter! I expect you to behave like a lady!’

‘What is all the noise?’

Jean-Claude turned around. Adrienne stood in the doorway of their bedroom, her silhouette framed by the bedside lamp. Her hair was mussed from sleep. She looked like she was a hundred years old. ‘Nothing is wrong. Go back to bed.’

‘You were shouting.’

‘Just go back to bed!’

Adrienne had been drinking again. He could smell the taint of it. Two drunks in the house.

‘It's all right, *maman,*’ Valentine said. She took her mother's arm and led her back to the bedroom. Jean- Claude watched the door close and then he slumped into a tall-backed chair by the window.

What has happened to my life? he asked himself. His once-beautiful wife spent her life closeted in her bedroom with a wine bottle, growing blowsy and fat. It seemed to him they had spent most of the last seven years in clinics and hospitals, seeing doctor after doctor, looking for someone who might exorcise her demons. None of them did any good.

And soon his little angel would be gone also. Now she had boyfriends. And she was only fifteen! Her blossoming sexuality and knowing green eyes terrified him.

Everything he loved had turned sour. His drunken wife was indifferent to him now, and Valentine … Valentine, his little angel, his comfort, his treasure, would soon be gone. He would lose her heart to some boy.

Valentine came out of the bedroom, shutting the door gently behind her. ‘Papa? What is it? Please don't fret. I'm sorry. I won't do it again.’ She knelt beside his chair.

He reached out for her. Valentine sat on his lap, and her fingers stroked the thinning strands of hair on his forehead.

‘It's all right, Papa. It will be all right.’

‘You're a good girl, Valentine,’ he whispered, but as he looked into his daughter's eyes - two dark pools surrounded by shallows of pale green - he shivered. She was Adrienne's daughter, there was no doubt about it. Her mother’s passions and longings were her legacy now.

He stroked a stray lock of hair from her cheek and wondered how long before everything he treasured would be gone.

CHAPTER 15

Saigon

Michel leaned on the handlebars of his Honda motor scooter, his eyes trained on the press of humanity on the sidewalk. It was early afternoon and the streets were crowded with schoolchildren in white and blue uniforms, young fresh-faced ARVN, and Vietnamese women in black pajamas and conical straw non-la carrying mangoes and pineapples to the market in wicker baskets.

Michel revved the engine and waited.

No Name leaned forward on the seat behind him. ‘Over there,’ he whispered. Michel looked where he was pointing. A middle-aged and plump Vietnamese woman in a flowing *ao-dai* was making her way along the arcade, close to the road. A heavy leather handbag bounced on her arm.

Michel revved the motor with a flick of his right wrist. Then he swooped across the flow of the traffic, ignoring the blaring horns of the motorbikes and taxis.

He maneuvered the scooter next to the curbside, his eyes fixed on the woman.

As they roared past No Name threw out an arm, his fingers clutching the straps of the bag, wrenching it free of the woman's arm. She screamed, attempted to grab it back, then fell forwards onto her knees.

‘Go!’ No Name shouted. Michel revved the Honda to full throttle and weaved away through the press of taxis and bikes.

Michel looked back over his shoulder and cursed, saw a bottle-green and white police jeep appear from a side street, and a cop got out, pulling his service revolver free of the holster at his hip.

‘Shit!’

He cut across the line of traffic, right in front of a sputtering Lambretta, spilling the rider, his wife and three children on to the road.

The first two gunshots were muted by the blaring of horns.

He couldn’t believe the cop would fire into a crowded street. These guys don’t give a shit about anyone anymore, he thought. A small boy on

the sidewalk a few feet away collapsed onto the ground. A Vietnamese woman, probably his mother, shrieked and rushed over to him.

Michel weaved down the street, looking for an alleyway that would take them to safety. He heard another gunshot and felt No Name slump forward and slip sideways off the pillion seat. The scooter skewed beneath him, the handlebars twisting around. Michel dropped the machine and threw himself clear. The Honda crashed into a food stall, spilling boiling soup and barbecued ducks onto the pavement.

Pandemonium.

Michel jumped back to his feet and ran through the screaming crowd, favoring his left foot, ignoring the pain in his twisted ankle.

He looked back just once. No Name lay face-down in the middle of the street. There was a large red stain on the back of his white T-shirt.

Too bad, Michel thought. But better you than me.

He heard the wail of police sirens.

He limped into a side street, ignoring the startled, frightened faces, and tried to lose himself among the press of secretaries, schoolchildren, beggars, hawkers and businessmen. He ran until the breath burned in his lungs and black spots appeared in front of his eyes. Soon he was in a part of Saigon even he did not know.

But the police whistles were still too close.

He looked up. The crude hand-painted sign over his head proclaimed in a gold lettering: The Saigon and Bombay Tailoring Company

Michel stumbled inside.

It was quiet in here, cool and dim. A heavy brass fan labored overhead. Racks of jackets and suits hung on a rail on the wall, partly concealed behind a thick red velvet drape. Behind the counter a handsome young man with wild eyes and denim jeans stared at him in mute surprise. He started, then realized it was his own reflection.

Suddenly a curtain at the back of the shop was thrown aside and a fat, balding Indian appeared. For a moment the two men just stared at each other. Joginder, anticipating a customer, had assumed a greasy smile. Seeing this thug in his shop, the smile vanished. ‘What do you want?’ he said.

Michel had already figured it out. He’d lost a lot of hair and blown up like a balloon, but when some bastard rapes your mother in front of you, when he turns you onto the street there’s something about him you don’t forget, it’s in his eyes, his voice, his smell.

‘What do you want?’ Joginder repeated. ‘Who are you?’

Michel heard the blasts of the police whistles fading into the distance. It was safe now. He could double back across the canal, disappear in the maze of Cholon city.

He turned for the door.

‘I said what do you want?’ Joginder repeated. ‘What are you doing here?’

Michel smiled at him. It was a smile that chilled the tailor to his very soul. He gave him a mocking salute and left. Joginder thought he said something like: ‘I’ll be back’. But he couldn’t be sure.

♦ ♦ ♦

Joginder Krisnan should have been a happy man. He had just delivered a new suit to an American colonel at the Caravelle. The colonel was an important man who had promised to recommend Joginder to his colleagues and associates. On any other day he would have been celebrating his good fortune.

Instead, as he made his way back to his shop through the darkening Saigon streets, his fleshy face was furrowed with concern.

He ignored the outstretched palms of the beggars. He usually slipped them a few coins for good karma. He hurried along, head down, sweat staining his white silk shirt. Tonight he did not enjoy the aromas of burning joss from the pagoda as he usually did, was not tempted by the tang of garlic and anise from the roadside stalls.

He took inventory of his life, as he liked to do at the end of every day; he now owned three shops, two in Bombay, and one in Saigon, on the Ngo Due Ke. He had a large six-room flat above his shop staffed with four servants. His Vietnam wife had borne him four sons, and he was grooming the two eldest boys to take over his business and maintain him through an early retirement.

On the debit side of the ledger, his other wife in Bombay was a harridan with betel-stained lips and a body like a concertina, but he had so contrived his affairs that he no longer had to spend more than a month or two every few years in her company. He had a Vietnamese mistress to cook and clean for him; she had also proved to be a capable seamstress. She

looked after their two sons and supervised the three Vietnamese he now employed as junior seamstresses.

When he tired of her, he had money enough to engage the talents of the prettier Chinese whores of Cholon, though he had found his carnal needs decreasing of late. He almost invariably preferred a good *bhel puri*.

Yes, Joginder Krisnan should have been a happy man.

Until that afternoon two days ago, so had he been. But the appearance of that desperate looking young man in his shop had disturbed his tranquility. He had tried to tell himself it was just his imagination but something about that face was too familiar. It was like looking at himself twenty years ago.

The Germans had a word for it. What was it? Doppelgänger. That was it. But there was nothing paranormal about this event. It could be him. It must be him.

He had not thought about it in a long time. He remembered that French whore, Adrienne, and that brat of hers that Sai had taken away, when he was still living in that dog hole on the Rue Le Loi. He should have died long ago. How could he have survived? What was more absurd - what if he recognized me?

He turned down the alleyway beside his shop. Stop worrying, you old fool, he told himself. Of course he didn't recognize you. How could he?

He was four years old the last time you saw him.

Stop worrying.

A hand closed over his mouth from behind and pulled him off his feet. He felt his bowels turn to water. He struggled feebly against the arm at his throat, but it was no good. Whoever it was, they were strong.

A switchblade glinted in the dark. Joginder felt the warm gush of his own urine down his leg.

I'm going to die.

Oh God, I'm going to die!

‘I ought to cut your throat now.’

Joginder tried to say something, tried to plead with his assailant but the hand clamped his jaw shut tight.

‘Don't struggle, it won't do you any good,’ the voice said. ‘God, you're like a sack of blubber. It would be like opening up a whale.’

He took his hand away but then his arm curled around his throat, squeezing so hard he thought his eyes would burst out of his head. ‘Please,

don't hurt me! What do you want? Money? I have money! But please, don't kill me!'

'You're disgusting,' the man said, and pushed him flat on his face. Joginder rolled over. The knife blade glittered a few inches from his face.

'Look at me.'

A fleck of spittle spilled from his lips and ran down his chin.

It was the Doppelgänger.

'Yes. You recognize me, don't you? You know who I am.'

'You must be mistaken, I don't know any—'

The toe of Michel's shoe hit him just under his chin, snapping his neck back. Joginder groaned, spat blood out of his mouth. Michel expertly emptied his pockets. He put a thick wad of bank notes into his pocket and dropped Joginder's wallet back into the alley.

Michel bent down. 'Thank you for the allowance, Father. I'll be back.'

Joginder didn't doubt it for a moment.

November 1967

Paris

The two cigarettes glowed in the doorway. It was late evening and the street lamps were on, throwing arcs of sodium light on to the pavement. The two girls, crouched in the doorway of the apartment building, seemed to shrink from it.

'What will you do after the *baccalauréat*' Valentine asked.

Madeleine blew a smoke ring. 'I want to be a model.'

'A model? Really?'

'I know what you're thinking. You're right, I suppose. I don't have the figure for it.'

'I wasn't thinking that.'

'We can't all be built like you, Valentine. You could be a movie star.'

'Don't be stupid.'

'It's true. Boys go crazy after you. So what will you do, after school?'

'I don't know, I haven't thought about it.'

‘Everybody thinks about it. What if you could do anything, go anywhere you wanted?’

Valentine shivered. It was getting late. In the distance the lights on the tip of the Tour Eiffel glowed red against the night.

‘I want to travel. Not just in Europe. To exotic places, like India and Siam.’

Madeleine laughed. ‘Oh, you want to be a hippie. Wear flowers in your hair.’

‘No, not that kind of travelling. I want to stay in big hotels and travel around in big limousines.’

‘What about men? Will you take a lot of lovers?’

Valentine frowned. ‘I want just one man. Someone tall and dark and a little wild. Someone dangerous and romantic. That's what I want.’ She stubbed out the cigarette on the stone doorstep. ‘But they're just silly dreams. Can I have another cigarette?’

They smoked in silence for a while, relishing the illicit act more than the bitter taste of the smoke.

‘How are things at home?’ Madeleine asked.

‘Bad.’

‘Your *maman?*’

Valentine nodded.

Almost on cue, they heard a woman screaming from the top-floor apartment.

‘Not again,’ she sighed. The orange glow of her cigarette tumbled end over end into the street.

‘Valentine ...’

She got to her feet. ‘I have to go. I'll see you tomorrow. At school.’

♦ ♦ ♦

Adrienne’s demons all looked the same; they had curiously mismatched eyes, and coffee colored skin; they stood in the corner of her room and shouted insults at her, accusing her of crimes she swore she did not commit. ‘You abandoned me!’

‘No, I didn't mean it to happen!’

‘I starved in the street like a dog!’

‘I didn't want that!’

‘I died inch by inch because you could only think of yourself!’

‘I thought it was for the best!’

Adrienne clawed at her own face, trying to get to that disembodied voice inside her head and tear it out. ‘Please . . . don't! Let me be …’

‘I curse you! I will never let you rest!’

When Valentine walked in, Adrienne was lying on the floor, shouting at phantoms again. There was an empty bottle of wine on the bedside table. The room stank of alcohol and stale perfume.

‘I didn't mean it to happen!’

Jean-Claude knelt beside her, holding her down. She kicked and thrashed and moaned. There was foam on her lips.

‘I didn't want that!’

‘Didn't want what? What didn't you want?’ Jean- Claude said to her.

Adrienne stared at her husband as if he were some stranger. She bucked her hips and rolled sideways, tearing herself free of him. She crawled across the room on her belly to Valentine, like an animal. Valentine took a step back.

‘Please leave me alone!’ Adrienne screamed.

Jean-Claude tried to grab her again.

‘Papa, what is she doing?’ Valentine said.

Jean-Claude seemed to notice her for the first time. He tried to smile. It was as if he were embarrassed. ‘Everything's all right, darling. I'll look after your mother. Just another bad dream, that’s all.’

Adrienne had torn slices of flesh from her cheeks with her fingernails. Valentine went down on her knees and caught her mother's wrists to stop her from doing it again.

‘No, *maman!*’

Jean-Claude started to shake. Yet his face was immobile, frozen in a half-grimace, half-smile. ‘She's all right,’ he said. ‘Nothing to worry about. She's all right.’

Adrienne arched her back and screamed. ‘Please . . . don't!’

‘*Maman?* What is it? What's wrong? Are you in pain?’

‘No! Please! Please!’

‘*Maman!*’

♦ ♦ ♦

Valentine looked up at the ormolu clock on the mantelpiece. Almost midnight. Jean-Claude came out of the bedroom. ‘It's all right,’ he said. ‘She's sleeping now. The sedative the doctor gave her is working.’

He slumped into an armchair. His body sagged, defeated.

‘What is wrong with her?’

‘I don't know.’ He put his face in his hands.

‘It's getting worse.’

Valentine got up and sat on the arm of his chair, put her arms around him. He felt so thin, so fragile. She was sad for him. If only he were stronger.

‘She'll be all right,’ he said.

‘Does she have to go to the hospital again?’

He shook his head. ‘I told the doctor I can look after her here.’

Valentine stared at the orange glow of the gas fire. The wind moaned, rattling the loose glass in the window pane. Jean-Claude closed his eyes, resting his head on his daughter's arm.

CHAPTER 16

Saigon

Joginder Krisnan's life had been changed very little by a war that, for almost twenty years, had become as much a backdrop to the country as the jungle itself. Despite having to pay VC tax - every merchant in Saigon was obliged to pay off the local Viet Cong cadres - he had twenty million piastres in his safe in the corner of his office. For the past three years he had stopped sending his money back to Bombay. He suspected his brother-in-law was cheating him, and, besides, he did not trust him with such enormous amounts. The next time he returned to India it would travel with him, to help purchase the villa high above Back Bay he had always promised himself.

He thought about his dream as he sat naked on the edge of the bed and watched a droplet of perspiration trickle down his chest and into the thick folds of his belly. It was stifling hot in the tiny room. The girl lying beside him stifled a yawn and sat up. ‘Baby want to fuck me now?’ she crooned, in a Texan drawl. ‘You *bamilam!* You Number thirty-five!’ Thirty-five was the Vietnamese symbol for virility.

Joginder pushed her away. ‘Leave me alone!’

She shrugged and picked up a nail file from the creaking bedside table. She started to manicure her nails.

A bed creaked on the other side of the thin wall, and Joginder listened to the theatrical groans of some other girl servicing a captain in the 7th US Cavalry. A tiny white chin chook lizard darted, ever watchful, along the exposed rough-hewn beams of the roof.

His impotence was all the girl's fault, of course. They were saving the really pretty ones for the Americans these days. Now the girls chewed gum and wore electric-pink skirts and make-up. He wished he'd gone to the café instead and read the newspaper.

He found himself thinking about Adrienne. He had never had trouble getting hard back then. He wondered if perhaps he should have been kinder to her. But what would have been the use? She would be old and fat just

like his wife by now. Besides, she was too demanding. She treated him like a coolie.

Well, she had had her revenge after all. He thought that after Michel stole his wallet he might be satisfied with that, but one night, as he sat down in his favorite restaurant, Michel had shown up again. He calmly pulled up a chair and sat down, as if he was his dinner guest.

‘Hello, Father.’ He had been wearing reflector sunglasses and a white T-shirt. A handsome young man, he had to admit; as he had been once. He saw how the pretty Vietnamese cashier looked at him. The manager saw her and cuffed her smartly behind the ear.

‘You don't seem pleased to see me,’ Michel said.

‘Get away from me.’

Michel lounged in his chair. ‘I'm sorry about our last meeting, Father. My emotions get away from me sometimes.’

‘Don't call me that! I'm not your father. I'll have you arrested!’

The smile vanished instantly and Michel leaned across the table, lowering his voice to a whisper. ‘Listen to me. I know who you are. We are blood, you and me. You owe me. Oh, you owe me so much.’

‘I don't know what you're talking about.’

‘A hundred thousand piastres! Have it ready for me. A hundred thousand piastres and you will never see me again.’

‘I don't have that much—’

‘A hundred thousand piastres,’ Michel said and got up to leave.

‘I'm a poor man,’ Joginder said. The thought of giving away so much money made him feel physically sick.

‘Just have the money ready,’ Michel said. ‘I’ll give you a week.’ He walked away and melted into the street, in seconds he was lost among the press of ARVN and American soldiers along Nguyen Van Thieu.

♦ ♦ ♦

A week passed, nothing. After a month he began to hope that he had forgotten about him.

Then one day Michel suddenly appeared beside him on the Tu Do. Joginder felt a friendly arm go around his shoulders ‘Do you have my inheritance?’ Joginder did not recognize Michel immediately, for he had

dyed his hair blonde. He could have passed for a Frenchman or a German. The boy was a chameleon.

Joginder fumbled in his breast pocket and took out the thick manila envelope he had carried with him everywhere for almost two weeks. ‘Here, take it and leave me alone,’ he said.

‘That’s it? After all I have suffered?’

‘Just go, for God's sake!’

Michel stuffed the envelope into his linen jacket. Then he was gone again, melting away as quickly as he had come. Joginder was just glad that it was finally all over.

But it had only just begun.

Michel came back, again and again, dogging him wherever he went. Always he wanted more money. Joginder thought of going to the police, but he knew there was nothing they could - or would - do. All they cared about was finding Viet Cong cadres in Cholon.

Still, Michel was cautious. He never showed up in the same place twice. Sometimes Joginder would not see him for three days, sometimes three weeks. But he would always come back.

Always asking for more money.

♦ ♦ ♦

Joginder heaved himself to his feet and started to dress. He looked at the girl preening and fussing over her crimson-painted nails. Women. They were nothing but trouble. Why couldn't Adrienne have cared for her little brat like a real mother?

Still, what was done, was done. It was pointless raking over the past. A solution would have to be found. Otherwise Michel might soon be asking him to take out adoption papers.

Yes, he thought. That's it!

Suddenly he knew what he had to do. It was so simple that he stopped halfway through buttoning his shirt and laughed out loud. The girl looked up, alarmed.

Joginder felt his depression lift. He clapped his hands and began to unbutton his shirt. Why hadn't he thought of it before?

He crawled on all fours across the bed, his monstrous belly swinging beneath him. At least one part of him was hard. ‘All right you dog-faced

little Chinese slut,' he chortled, couching his insults in Hindi, 'the jewel has once again found its sparkle.'

♦ ♦ ♦

A little later, as Joginder stepped out into the hot afternoon sun, Michel was waiting for him in the back of a *cyclopousse*.

'Can I offer you a lift, Father?'

Joginder caught his breath, startled. 'Well, speak of the Devil …'

'Did you have a pleasant afternoon?'

Joginder eased his bulk onto the cracked leatherette seat next to Michel. The skinny Vietnamese driver stood on his pedals and guided his substantial cargo into the snarl of traffic.

'You don't seem pleased to see me, Father.'

'All you ever want is money. You never give me the chance to talk to you.'

The vapid smile slipped away. 'A bit late for a fatherly chat, isn't it?'

'I've wronged you. I do not deny it. Perhaps, if you give me a chance, I can make up for it.'

Michel sat forward so violently their driver had to jerk the handlebars to the left to prevent them from crashing into the curbstones. 'Make up for it! Make up for throwing a four-year-old boy out on to the street?'

'It was a long time ago. Everyone changes. As I said, I do not deny that I've wronged you.'

There it was; a flicker of hope, there in his eyes. You're all bluff, Joginder thought.

'Well then you can start with another hundred thousand piastres. Perhaps that will help assuage your guilt.'

They were caught in the sprawl of traffic beside the Saigon River. Big-bellied children and thin-ribbed dogs squabbled in the mud alleys between the wooden shanties. Michel pointed. 'Look, that was what you condemned me to! While you were growing fat on chicken grease I was fighting with pi-dogs for scraps of food in Cholon! Now it's your turn to pay.' Michel clambered down into the road.

Joginder caught him by the wrist. 'Wait! I have something to say.'

That seemed to surprise him. He shrugged and climbed back on.

‘Look, Michel, every man makes mistakes when he is younger. Only a few of us ever have the chance to right them again. I'm not asking for your forgiveness. All I want is the chance to perhaps to atone for the wrong I have done.’

‘What are you talking about?’

‘I can do more than give you a few thousand piastres. I can give you a new life.’

‘How?’

Joginder licked his lips. ‘Soon I will be leaving Saigon. Things are bad here. The Viet Cong are making life miserable for everyone. I will close the shop and go back to India. I have two more shops in Bombay and my family is there, I have a wife and four sons.’ He took a deep breath. ‘I want you to come with me.’

‘Why?’

‘I need an extra pair of hands to help me run the shops. You are young. I can teach you. I don't want to work for ever. You will be my adopted son. You will finally have a family, somewhere you belong.’

Michel looked away, at the crumbling shophouses, the bars and street stalls, the bootblacks and war-crippled beggars, and everywhere the battle greens of the ARVN and the American soldiers. For a moment he thought the tough guy was going to cry.

‘Don't you want to get away from here. Michel?’

‘How can I trust you?’

‘Give me one more chance. Please.’

Michel launched himself from the back of the *cyclopousse*, almost spilling it on its side. He walked straight into the path of a Vespa, sent it swerving into the side of a taxi. The rider dropped the machine into the gutter and then got to his feet screaming abuse at the *cyclopousse* driver and at Joginder.

When the Indian tailor looked around for Michel, he was gone.

Well, he had done all he could.

Now he would just have to wait.

♦ ♦ ♦

One night almost a week later Joginder was at his workbench, the oil lamp hissing and spluttering, working the seams of a dress jacket he was

tailoring for a Marine staff officer. He resettled the half-moon spectacles on his nose and adjusted the bobbin on the ancient Singer foot-pedal machine. There was a gentle tapping at the door.

Joginder got up, rubbing his eyes with the balls of his fists. ‘Who is it?’

There was no answer. It’s him, he thought. He took a moment to compose himself and threw open the door.

‘Michel!’

‘Hello, Father.’

‘You want money?’

‘No. I want to go to Bombay.’

Joginder grinned and flung open his arms. ‘Welcome home,’ he said, and pulled him close and hugged him.

♦ ♦ ♦

‘Why can't I stay here?’

‘Because the soldiers will find you and you will be drafted into the army. You can avoid them on the streets, but they come here at least once a week looking for draft dodgers.’

‘What about you then? When will you go back to India?’

‘I don’t know. One day. But while the Americans are still here, there is a lot of money to be made. War is good for men like me. But when it is over I will go back to Bombay and retire. I will let my family run my businesses.’ He reached forward and patted Michel's hand. ‘You see, you do have a legacy after all.’

They were sitting in the tailor's cool and shuttered office above his shop on Ngo Due Ke. The office faced a Chinese cinema. Through a half-open shutter Michel stared at a hand-painted poster of an almond-eyed Chinese in a Stetson massacring Red Indians with an AK-47. The lurid reds and greens of the poster hurt his eyes. He looked back at Joginder, who was pouring black tea into two small and tannin-stained china cups.

‘You have no identity,’ Joginder was saying, ‘no papers. Without papers you do not exist in this world.’

‘I'm your son. You can get me an Indian passport.’

‘It’s not as easy as that. The hospital did not keep records. I have been to the Indian consulate and they insist that you spend twelve months in

India and learn one of the languages before they will give citizenship.'

'I don't understand. So how will I get to Bombay?'

'Don't worry. I have prepared everything.' Joginder reached into a drawer and threw some papers on the desk. 'I have arranged a safe-transit document from Vietnam to India. You travel on the SS Siam.'

'And then?'

'After a year in Bombay you will get your papers. You will become a citizen of India, like myself. Then perhaps you can come and work here with me and learnt the business until I am ready to retire. The important thing is you will have an identity.' Joginder put a hand to his chest in a gesture of contrition. 'And I will be able to sleep easy again in my bed.'

It would have been so easy to have killed you, Michel thought. That night in the alley he had planned to cut the tailor's throat. Something had held him back. It wasn't pity; he just wanted him to suffer more.

It was only later he had realized that the tailor was rich, far richer than he had imagined. He had used Joginder's money to indulge his gambling habits at the cock-fights and at the racetrack on the Su Van Hahn. He didn't have to hustle and steal any more.

One day I'll settle with you for good, he thought. For now you're still useful to me.

'I hated you so much,' Michel said.

'I understand that, and I am not asking you to forget the past. Only to weigh it against the future.'

'All right. When do I leave?'

'The day after tomorrow,' Joginder said. 'That is when you start your new life.'

The Gage Roads, Bombay

Michel stared at the dirty, milk chocolate water. As they sailed closer to the mainland, the air had become tainted with the smells of the vast city, the stench of decay and pollution carried on the offshore breeze. Bombay lay just beyond the indigo horizon. By morning their rusty freighter would be anchored within sight of the Gateway wall and the crumbling Gothic and colonial buildings of the waterfront.

Almost two weeks since they had sailed out of the docks at Saigon. He had stood at the guardrail that last evening and solemnly said his farewells to his father. It had all seemed unreal, a fantasy come to life.

‘My brother will be there to meet you in Bombay,’ Joginder had told him. ‘I have written and told him all about you. He will take good care of you.’ The tailor reached into his pocket and handed him an envelope. ‘Here is a little money to tide you over.’

There was two thousand piastres inside.

‘I hope to hear good reports of you.’ He held out his hand.

Michel took it. It was soft, like a woman's. ‘When will I see you again?’

‘How many times must I tell you? As soon as you have your citizenship papers you can return whenever you want. I look forward to that day.’

‘In case I don't... in case something happens. I want you to tell me her name.’

‘Whose name?’

‘My mother’s.’

Joginder's smile faded. ‘Why do you want to know that?’

‘Just tell me.’

‘Can't you forget all about that? It was such a long time ago. Think only about tomorrow.’

‘Tell-me-her-name.’

Joginder sighed: ‘Adrienne. Adrienne Christian.’

‘What was she like?’

Joginder’s face shone with sweat. He dabbed at it with a voluminous white handkerchief. ‘I can't remember her. It was over twenty years ago now. She had long black hair and she was very pretty.’

‘Did you love her?’

‘She was a devil. All women are devils.’

‘But you must have loved her once.’

‘I don't want to talk about it.’

‘I must know. I want to know all about her.’

‘Why? What does it matter to you now?”

‘The past is everything. It is with us always.’

‘Well I've forgotten all about it,’ Joginder said. ‘I'd better be going. The boat will be leaving soon.’

Michel put a hand on his arm. ‘Where is she now?’

‘How should I know? I never saw her again.’

‘You must have heard something.’

‘All I know is she left Saigon a few months after . . . after she abandoned you. Now forget about it. It doesn't do any good.’

‘Did she get married again?’

‘I don't know. I think so.’

‘One day I will find her again.’

‘Impossible.’

‘No, not impossible. And if there is a way, I will find it.’

‘And do what?’

‘She owes me a debt. And she will repay it, like you are repaying yours to me.’ Suddenly Michel threw his arms around his father's shoulders and embraced him. His lips brushed the older man's cheek. ‘Thank you, Father. You have saved me. You have given me a home again.’

Joginder seemed stunned by the sudden display of affection. He loosened the collar of his shirt. ‘I'm only doing what I should have done a long time ago. Goodbye, Michel.’

‘Au revoir,’ Michel said.

An hour later the SS Siam had steamed out into the South China Sea, and its lights were swallowed up by the deepening night.

♦ ♦ ♦

Michel woke moments before they came for him. On the street he had developed a sixth sense that alerted him to danger, to the slightest noise, and he sat upright in his bunk and looked around. It was dark in the cabin. The North Star was framed in the tiny porthole, a needlepoint of brilliant white. Michel knew something was wrong. He swung his legs out of his bunk and fumbled for his clothes.

But before he could dress the door crashed open and he felt an arm go around his throat. Michel struck behind him with an elbow, then lashed out with his heel. In the darkness, a man screamed.

But there were more of them, how many he couldn’t tell. He was wrestled to the deck. Michel struggled with the desperation of a wild animal, biting, clawing kicking out at his unseen assailants. A fist smashed into his face, stunning him.

Then a knee hammered into his groin and he heard himself scream. He curled into a ball on the cabin floor to protect himself from further blows. One of the attackers knelt on his back, pulling his hands behind him, and he felt a thin cord biting into his wrists. Someone else took a handful of his hair and smashed his head repeatedly against the metal decking until he passed out.

When he opened his eyes he found himself lying in storage, a space barely wide enough to stretch his legs. One wall curved with the hull of the ship, and foul oil-stained water slopped on the floor. There were no windows, so he guessed he was somewhere below the waterline.

His arms were tied behind him, and the barest movement sent spasms of pain through his shoulders and wrists. Michel hawked into the bilges and tried to sit upright. He couldn't do it. He allowed his body to sink back into the lapping rust-stained water.

He tried to think, make sense of this nightmare.

What had happened? He had a valid ticket. The captain must be in on this. But what did he want? He wouldn't do this just for the two thousand piastres Michel had in his bag.

For now, there was nothing he could do. He conserved his strength and waited.

♦ ♦ ♦

January in India is the dry season. Around Bombay it is only slightly cooler than the mid-year monsoon, the temperature hovering in the eighties day after day. By late afternoon the sun has scorched all the oxygen from the air. It is like living inside a pressure cooker.

When they finally dragged Michel out of the storage hold, the heat below decks had reached almost a hundred and ten degrees. He was already dehydrated, and his tongue had swollen in his mouth like a bruised plum. They threw him on the floor in the captain's cabin and stood aside.

Captain Parwit Charankorn studied the young man and swallowed down his feelings of regret. He earned thirty dollars a month for navigating this rustbucket between Saigon and Bombay and he had a wife and nine children in Bangkok. When the Indian tailor had waved the fistful of rupees under his nose, he could hardly refuse

Still, he was not by nature a cruel man, and he didn’t enjoy seeing another man suffer. He turned to one of the crewmen who had dragged Michel up from the holds. ‘Give him some water,’ he said.

The man went out and returned a few moments later with a metal cup. He held Michel's head back and tipped the water into his mouth. He spluttered and coughed as it went down his throat, but it revived him a little.

♦ ♦ ♦

Michel looked up into the unsmiling face of Captain Parwit. It seemed to float in the air above his head, the round apple cheeks the color of burnished bronze. Michel tried to speak, but the words would not come out.

‘You are a stowaway,’ Captain Parwit said slowly, in halting English.

Michel shook his head desperately. He recognized the three crewmen who had done this to him. He had seen them every day of the voyage. He had seen the captain perhaps only twice, but the captain had certainly seen him. They knew he wasn't a stowaway.

Perhaps he had caught a fever. In a moment he would wake up and the terrible dream would end.

‘You are a stowaway,’ Captain Parwit repeated.

‘No,’ Michel croaked. ‘My ... my father. He paid ... for my tickets ... in Saigon.’

‘What is your father's name?’

‘Krisnan . . . Joginder Krisnan,’ Michel said. His head ached. It felt as if it were splitting apart.

‘I know nobody of that name. Where are your papers?’

‘In my cabin ...’

‘You do not have a cabin. You are a stowaway.’

‘But my father ...’ Michel began, and stopped. In that moment he saw it all with blinding absolute clarity.

‘You are a stowaway,’ Captain Parwit repeated. ‘I must hand you over to the authorities in Bombay. Do you understand?’

‘How much did … my father pay you?’

‘I don't know what you're talking about. Take him up. The police launch will be alongside any moment.’

Michel went for him, or he would have done if he had the strength left in his body. But it wasn't the Thai captain he imagined in front of him, it

was the tailor. He wanted to tear his throat out with his teeth. As it was the crewmen grabbed him easily before he could reach the captain and then kicked him till he lay still.

White-faced and trembling, Captain Parwit got to his feet. ‘Take him away,’ he said. ‘Quickly. He's a madman.’

♦ ♦ ♦

Michel smelled the Port of Bombay jail long before he first saw it.

He was handcuffed to three other men, all Indians, in the back of a prison van. Through the mesh grille of the rear window he stared at the press of traffic as it honked and jostled; the ox-carts, buses, cyclists, trucks and battered hand carts competing with the yells of the balloon sellers and the chants of the *saddhus*.

Over it all hung the sour odor of decay and stale urine.

The man at his side nudged him. ‘That is the prison,’ he said, grinning, revealing the brown stumps that were all that remained of his teeth.

‘Oh God.’

‘What did you do?’

‘Nothing,’ Michel said. ‘My father ...’ he stopped, still too bitter to recount the betrayal. ‘I have no papers.’

The Indian rubbed his fingers together in a pantomime of counting notes. ‘You have money?’

‘I have two thousand piastres.’

‘Piastres? What are they?’

‘It’s Vietnamese money.’

The other man laughed. He turned to the others and said something in Hindi. They laughed as well.

‘What’s so funny?’

‘Keep the money. It will be very useful. For lighting a fire, perhaps!’ He laughed again; he was starting to get on Michel’s nerves. ‘Unless you have rupees or American money you might as well have nothing.’

Michel kicked the side of the van in fury. ‘The bastard! When I get my hands on him, I'll cut out his liver and shove it down his fucking throat!’

‘If you get out, my friend,’ the man said quietly.

‘What do you mean, if? I'm only a stowaway. They'll ship me back to Vietnam, won't they?’

‘First you must be brought to trial.’

‘What?’

‘You should have murdered someone,’ he said. ‘Like I did. It would have been easier for you.’

‘What are you talking about?’

‘Take a last glimpse at the world, friend.’

‘How long will they give me?’

‘Six months. But that is not the problem. As I said, first you must get to court.’

‘So?’

‘You do not understand. To get to court you need a lawyer. Lawyers must be paid. Without a lawyer you can wait a very long time for justice in India. Perhaps you will rot and die in jail. Many do. Who will care?’-

He was right. Who would care? No one.

No one.

CHAPTER 17

Port of Bombay Prison

Mud walls the color of mustard, vultures squatting in grotesque malevolence, preening grease-black feathers and craning their pork-pink necks into the compound at the shuffling and miserable humanity below. A pall of dust clung to the scorched air. Women clustered around the medieval wooden gates, clutching pannikins of curries and boiled rice and dried fruits while the guards, in their shabby dun-colored uniforms, looked on, silent, bearded, unmoved.

Andrew Rosen sat in the shade outside the mud hut in the ‘Western section’ listening to the footfall of the guard on the wall. Lank blond hair curled around his shoulders, and his thin goatee beard accentuated, rather than disguised, his youthfulness. He was pale and thin; the filthy, embroidered shirt he wore had been bought in a bazaar in Kabul.

He had been in Bombay prison for seven months, ever since he had been arrested on the street, buying hashish from a snaggle-toothed Indian boy, a police informer. He had sent an urgent telegram to his father in San Francisco.

This time his father had refused to bail him out.

Jack Rosen had wanted his son to go into the family business, become the third generation of Rosen Marine. Instead Andy had grown his hair, dropped out of high school, and played Rolling Stones and Beatles records day and night. One night, Rosen Senior told his indolent son to get out of the house. He probably hadn’t mean it, but two days later young Andy was gone. It had been the first time in a very long while that he had obeyed one of his father’s instructions.

Jack did not hear from his son again until he received a postcard picture of the Parthenon. There was one word scrawled on the back. It said: ‘Athens’.

Two weeks later Andy wrote again. He was in prison in Istanbul. He needed money.

Twice more, in Tehran and Kabul, Rosen had bought his errant son out of trouble. Each time he had extracted written promises that Andy would

use the rest of the money to buy an air ticket back to the United States. Instead Andy just kept going further along the pot trail across Asia.

This time he had decided to teach his son a lesson.

Andy had accepted his punishment with equanimity. He knew that finally, when his father considered he had done a suitable penance, he would get him out.

He always did.

Now he watched with idle curiosity as the new prisoner was led across the compound, escorted by two khaki-clad soldiers. He was tall, with shoulder-length blond hair - black roots though - and startling brown eyes that didn't quite match. His clothes - a Western-style T-shirt and blue denim jeans - were ragged and filthy, but the man who wore them had a panther-like grace about him. He looked around at his new surroundings with an arrogant calm.

Even when the two guards pitched him forward onto the skillet-hard earth, he seemed unperturbed. He got nimbly to his feet and brushed off his filthy and sweat-stained clothes as if brushing a little dust from his tuxedo.

'Welcome to the Bombay Hilton,' Andy said.

'Thanks. I won't be staying long.'

The young American laughed. 'Andy Rosen.' He held out a pale, bony hand.

'Michel.' For the first time Michel used the surname he had discovered just two weeks ago. 'Michel Christian.'

'You're French?'

'My mother was.' Michel looked at the Sikh guard in his puttees, patrolling the five-meter-high wall above them, an ancient Enfield carbine slung over his shoulder. 'What's the best way out of here?'

Andy followed his gaze to the wall. 'Think you can jump that high?'

'There are other ways,' Michel said.

'Sure. You can buy your way out. Or die. What are you in for?'

'They say I'm a stowaway.'

'That's not too bad. You have money?'

'Not enough.'

'Then you must get some. Where are your family?'

'I don't have a family.'

'There must be someone. Everyone has a family.'

'No. I have no one.'

‘Then you're a dead man, pal.’

Michel did not seem to be listening. He seemed to be measuring the distance between the hut and the prison wall. He could hear the *bazaaris* haggling in the market just on the other side.

‘How far is it to the wall?’

‘Who cares?’

‘It cannot be more than twenty meters.’

‘Go anywhere near that wall and they'll shoot you down like a dog.’

‘No, they won't, because they won't see me.’

‘Why? Are you going to make yourself invisible?’

‘No,’ Michel said. ‘I'm going to dig a tunnel.’

♦ ♦ ♦

There were two prisoners sharing the hut; another American and a French-Canadian. Freak had been a freshman at UCLA when the Beatles held the first five positions on the US Billboard charts and the US Congress passed the Gulf of Tonkin resolution. Soon after, he discovered acid and the Rolling Stones, grew his hair, dropped out of college, and went to live in Haight-Ashbury. In 1965 he had been drafted into the US army. In 1966 he lost his right arm below the elbow just north of Da Nang.

He had developed a taste for the strong Afghan hash he bribed the guards to smuggle into his cell. Most days he drifted in and out of a psychedelic haze, mumbling unintelligibly into his beard.

The French-Canadian was known as Belmondo. His real name was Serge Duval, but he had earned his nickname because of his resemblance to the French actor of the same name. He claimed to own a two-story house in Quebec and somehow managed to retain an appearance of sartorial elegance. It was an illusion of personality, for his silk shirt was ripped under each arm and his cream cotton slacks were dirt-smeared and patched.

He had been arrested by the Indian police for fraud. When they had opened his luggage at Bombay airport they had found twenty-three passports.

He was scornful when Michel told him about his plan. ‘*Fou!*’ he said, in French. ‘The earth, here … see! It is baked hard.’ He beat his hand on the floor to emphasize his point. ‘You might as well try to dig through solid rock with your fingernails!’

‘I didn't ask if you thought it was possible,’ Michel said calmly. ‘Only if you wanted to help.’

‘*Mais non!* I have bribed a lawyer to get me out of here. Why risk everything on a craziness like this?’

Michel turned to Freak, who was rocking gently on his heels in the corner. Michel said, in English: ‘I'm going to dig a tunnel from the corner of the hut under the wall and into the bazaar. Do you understand?’

Freak giggled and waved the stump of his arm at him. ‘No shit.’

‘Do you want to help?’

Freak continued to rock back and forward, back and forward. Andy tugged at Michel's sleeve. ‘You won't get any sense out of him tonight. We'll talk to him in the morning.’

Michel shrugged. ‘All right.’ He held out his hand. ‘Give me your spoon.’

‘My spoon?’

‘I need something to dig with.’

Belmondo leaned his head against the wall and guffawed. ‘A spoon! *Magnifique!* By the time you reach the wall they'll have to get you out of the hole in a wheelchair!’

Michel ignored him. ‘The spoon.’

Andy unwrapped his flimsy bundle of possessions and handed Michel his metal spoon. He had paid one of the guards a *ghusa* - a bribe - to buy it for him in the bazaar. He didn’t want to part with it but he didn’t see how he could say no.

Michel went to the far corner of the hut and began to scrape at the dirt.

‘Give him an hour,’ Belmondo said to Andy, ‘he'll have had enough. Then we'll have enough talk about tunnels. Imbecile!’

But Belmondo had underestimated his man. As he dug, Michel thought of Joginder and Adrienne. With each scrape of the brick-hard earth he made a silent promise that they would both live to regret what they had done to him.

It was that thought that gave him strength.

He dug all through the night, waiting when the guard's footsteps came close, then beginning again as soon as the steady tramp-tramp continued along the wall. He kept working until the first light.

When Belmondo and Andy woke, they found that Michel had dug down almost three feet. ‘Four days,’ he beamed triumphantly. ‘Four days

and we'll be out of here.'

'If the guards find the hole we're all for it!' Belmondo said, staring at the hole open-mouthed. 'He is going to ruin everything for me!'

Michel looked up at Belmondo with candid amusement. 'They will not find it. We will cover it with our sleeping mats.'

'What about the dirt? What will you do? Leave it in a pile outside the hut and hope no one will notice?'

'No,' Michel answered, his tone sweetly reasonable. 'We will spread it over the floor of the hut. We can take the big rocks to the outhouse toilet inside our shirts and empty them there.'

Andy smiled. It occurred to him that Michel's plan might work.

Belmondo hauled Michel to his feet. 'Enough! You will not endanger me with your stupid tunnel!'

'I think you should let go of me,' Michel said.

'What if I don't, you scrawny little gook?'

Michel's knee jerked into Belmondo's groin and his hands moved so swiftly Andy did not even see the blows. Suddenly Belmondo lay flat on his back, thick blood oozing from his nose and teeth.

Belmondo put a hand to his mouth and found one of his front teeth in his palm. '*Bordel de merde* … what … what have you done?'

'Don't ever touch me again,' Michel said. He bent down, his voice low and chill. 'I'm getting out of here. And nothing is going to stop me.'

♦ ♦ ♦

Freak sat outside the door of the hut, playing his bongo drums to cover the noise of the excavation taking place inside. Andy went inside with a pannikin of slimy rice and a half-raw chapati. Michel's feet protruded just out of the hole.

Andy knelt down and tapped him on the ankle. 'Michel. Here, you gotta eat.'

He helped Michel haul himself out of the hole. He had toiled for almost eighteen hours without a break.

Michel took the rice from him and wolfed it down. 'Are you coming with me?'

'If I don't, the guards will beat the shit out of the rest of us. Yes, why not?'

‘What about the other two?’

‘The hippy wants in. But I haven't seen your friend Belmondo since this morning.’

‘Where is he?’

‘I don't know. Probably still sulking because you bruised his pretty face. Where did you learn to fight like that?’

‘At school.’

‘At school?’

Michel wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. ‘I went to a very tough school. It was as big as a city and everyone was a teacher. It was called Cholon.’

Andy looked at the hole. He couldn’t believe how big it was getting. Michel’s determination astonished him. ‘You must want to get out pretty bad.’

‘Oh, yes, I want to get out very badly. There is someone I have to see again. Every day away is a day too long.’

‘A girl?’

‘No. My father.’

‘Your old man?’

‘Yes, my old man. He is in Saigon, right now, fucking his yellow whores and counting his money and laughing at the way he tricked me. He put me on a boat and paid the captain to turn me in as a stowaway. He thinks he has got rid of me.’

‘Jesus, man. This is a joke, right?’

‘Yes, it's a sort of joke. On me. But when I get out of here the joke will not be so funny anymore. Because I'm going to kill him.’

The tap-tap of the drums stopped abruptly. It was their warning signal. Freak had spotted a guard heading their way.

‘Shit,’ Andy murmured.

Michel was on his feet in an instant, spreading his bamboo sleeping mat across the hole in the floor. Andy went to the doorway, thinking to stall the guard somehow. He didn't get more than a couple of paces. The chief head warden and •two guards burst in and one of the guards shoved Andy off his feet with the butt of his rifle.

Michel was already squatting on the mat, the pannikin and spoon in his lap. He took a spoonful of rice, looked up at the warden and offered him a beatific smile.

‘Where is it?’ the warden growled, in English.

‘I don't understand,’ Michel said.

The warden looked at the bamboo mat and kicked Michel off it. Then he bent down and whipped it away with a flick of his wrist. The dark mouth of the hole yawned back at him.

Michel hawked the phlegm from deep in his throat and spat on the floor. ‘Belmondo.’

‘Oh, Jesus Christ,’ Andy whispered and then the first boot thumped into his stomach.

♦ ♦ ♦

The chief head warden was a tall, ramrod-straight Sikh. He wore the uniform of a major in the Indian army. He had a full and luxurious beard, and all the arrogance of a career officer sent to exile in a demeaning job. He prided himself that no one had ever escaped from the prison while he had been the warden, and the discovery of the tunnel had outraged him.

He was deeply offended that this half caste and his friends might even think of disgracing him in such a manner. He had the guards drag all three of them into his office.

‘Take off your clothes,’ he growled.

‘These two men had nothing to do with the tunnel,’ Michel said. ‘It was my idea. I did it all.’

The warden drove his fist into Michel's stomach, and was disappointed to feel the youth’s hard muscles absorb the blow. Michel gasped and doubled over, but he did not fall.

‘Let them go ...’ he groaned.

‘I said: “Take off your clothes.” ’

He waited as the three men stripped down. He smiled. The American hippy was trembling like a girl. A yellow rope of urine spurted from him. His knees gave way and he started to fall. One of the guards stepped forward to catch him, holding him up by the hair.

‘Oh, shit...’ Freak mumbled. ‘Christ all fucking mighty ...’

The warden took off the thick leather belt at his waist and wrapped it around his fist, left the heavy buckle resting across the knuckles. ‘Now, I am going to teach you a lesson. I will show you what happens when you try

to escape from my prison. I am going to make you curse your mothers for ever bringing you into the world.'

♦ ♦ ♦

When Andy woke, he was lying in a bed in the hospital. A prison guard - one of the men who had beaten him - sat by the door sipping a cup of tea, his rifle resting across his knees.

Andy tried to move his arms and discovered his left wrist was manacled to the iron rail of the cot.

There was an intense rhythmic pain behind his eyes and when he tried to sit up a sharp pain knifed through his lower abdomen, and he abandoned the effort. He remembered the chief head warden and the belt buckle.

He groaned again and closed his eyes.

Later a doctor examined him and told him, in faltering English: 'You have concussion and a ruptured hernia. Someone has misused you very badly.' Andy noticed the man's deep brown eyes and the concerned frown on his face. 'I will try and persuade them to remove the handcuffs,' he promised.

Good as his word, that night the cuffs were removed.

Andy stayed in the hospital for three weeks. When they took him back to the prison, Michel was waiting for him. The white of one eye was still the color of an overripe plum, and the scabrous wounds on his lips and above his right eye were infected. He had lost perhaps ten pounds. He looked a wreck.

The guards left Andy at the door of the hut and marched away.

Michel struggled to his feet and embraced him. Then he put his mouth to his ear. 'I've started another tunnel,' he whispered. 'We're halfway to the wall already! We're getting out of here!'

CHAPTER 18

Freak squatted in the corner, tears leaking down his cheeks and into his beard. His arms were wrapped around his knees. He looked like some grotesque and withered gnome. He was sobbing and muttering to himself. None of them could make out what he was saying.

‘What's the matter with him?’ Andy whispered.

Michel shrugged. ‘He's been like that since they found the first tunnel. He's frightened of the warden.’

‘What are we going to do?’

‘He smokes too much shit. And he's weak. It's not our problem.’

‘We have to do something.’

‘Why?’ Michel sat in the doorway, spooning down some watery *lopsi* - a porridge made from flour and salt - his breakfast ration.

‘Because we can't just sit here and watch him die!’

Michel did not answer. Andy heard the spoon scraping the tin bottom of the pannikin.

‘You don't give a damn, do you?’

‘There are two kinds of people in the world,’ Michel said. ‘There are the weak and there are the strong. The weak give in when they are faced with a problem and they die. The strong conquer life and survive. Your American friend is weak. It doesn't matter what we do. He's not going to make it.’

Freak mumbled something else and started to laugh. He waved the milk-white stump of his arm at them. Andy remembered how one of the guards had stamped his boot on it during the beating.

‘He's frightened of what will happen if the guards find this new tunnel.’

‘Aren't you?’

‘So they will beat us again. It's not important. What is important is getting out of here.’

‘Christ, you mean it, don't you?’

‘You can stay behind if you want to. Or perhaps you're thinking of reporting the tunnel to the warden, like Belmondo?’

‘You know I wouldn't do that.’ In fact he had thought about it several times. ‘By the way, where is Belmondo?’ Andy said. ‘Did his lawyer get

him out, after all?’

‘Belmondo's dead.’

‘Dead?’

‘He had a fall in the shithouse. Smashed his head on a concrete trough.’

‘Jesus Christ.’

Michel put down the pannikin, got to his feet and walked to the far corner of the hut. He pulled back his bamboo mat. Andy stared at the new hole.

‘Time to get back to work.’

‘Michel ... it wasn't you, was it?’

‘What do you mean?’

‘I mean ... it wasn't . . . you didn't kill Belmondo, did you?’

‘I told you, he fell.’ Michel laughed, a harsh sound like breaking glass. ‘Do I look like a murderer to you?’

♦ ♦ ♦

Freak was dead.

He lay inside the hut, curled in a fetal position, the stump of his right arm tucked beneath him. Andy squatted down beside him and prised the glass pill bottle out of Freak’s fingers. ‘Jesus.’

‘What are they?’ Michel asked.

‘Mandrax. Sleeping tablets. Couple of these will put you out for the night. Looks like he swallowed half the bottle.’

Michel took them. He seemed more interested in the pills than the corpse at his feet. ‘Where did he get them?’

‘Bribed a guard I suppose. Same way we get anything in here.’

Michel emptied the remaining pills into his hand and put them into the pocket of his jeans.

‘What are you doing?’ Andy said.

‘He won't be wanting them anymore.’

‘What do you need them for?’

‘Something that puts people to sleep might be very useful to us.’ Michel grabbed Freak’s feet and started to drag him out of the hut. ‘Let's get him out of here before he starts to stink.’

♦ ♦ ♦

The tunnel was nine feet deep and fifteen feet long. The detritus from the hole had raised the floor of the hut four inches so that Michel and Andy had to step up to get inside. But the chief head warden, thinking that he had taught the two Westerners a lesson, no longer bothered to visit them.

Each morning and evening Michel jogged around the exercise yard, running the stiffness out of his muscles. The bemused faces of the other prisoners followed him as he completed his laps of the compound; occasionally one of the guards would yell something at him in Hindi and there would be a short bark of humorless laughter from his comrades.

Michel paid them no attention. For him, they did not exist.

One evening, soon after his return from hospital, Andy decided to join him, therapy for his broken body. He found it hard to keep up with him.

‘Tonight,’ Michel whispered.

‘It's … finished?’

‘Yes. Are you coming?’

‘Michel ...’ Andy panted. ‘Can you wait ... a few … days?’

Michel stopped. Andy stopped too, rested his hands on his knees, out of breath. The beating and the three weeks in hospital had taken more out of him than he thought.

‘Why do you want me to wait?’

‘I got a letter from my old man today. He's organizing bail for me. I'll be out of here in a couple of days. No more than a week, anyway.’ Andy looked pleadingly at his new friend. ‘Michel, I can't take the risk. Not now.’

‘All right, then. Stay here.’

‘You'll wait?’

‘No. I've already waited too long.’

‘Please ...’

Michel grabbed his arm. ‘Every hour that goes by is an hour too long! What if one of the guards walks behind the hut to take a piss and falls through that fucking hole! No. I go - tonight!’ He looked up at the wall. One of the guards in the watchtower was staring at them. ‘Keep running.’

He set off again. Andy jogged along miserably behind him. ‘I'm frightened, Michel.’

‘I'll tell you what to do, then. I’ll give you a couple of Mandrax. Once you’re asleep, I’ll call the guard. They’ll think you’ve had a relapse and

send you back to the hospital. So you won't even be here when I escape.’

Andy felt overcome with gratitude. ‘Thanks Michel.’

They reached the hut. Michel waved cheerfully to the guards on the wall. One of them flicked the stub of his cigarette at him and turned away, scowling.

Michel looked up at the sky. A crescent sliver of moon rode the watery blue of the evening sky. ‘Next time you see the moon I shall be far away from here,’ he said. ‘No one will ever put me in a cage again.’

♦ ♦ ♦

Michel crawled on his belly through the narrow burrow he had scraped from the hard earth. He’d calculated it to twenty feet, might as well be twenty miles, he thought. He tried not to think about it giving way. He could think of better ways to die than to suffocate under four feet of baked clay.

It took no more than two minutes to wriggle the length of the tunnel, a journey he had made countless times in the last few weeks. At last he reached the upward curve at the far end and began to punch free the last few inches of earth.

The dirt cascaded onto his head, got in his eyes and mouth and nose. He spat it out. When he looked back he saw the sparkle of the night stars welcoming him. He smiled and started to crawl out of the hole.

He heard someone light a match very close by. He looked up into the shocked face of the turbaned Sikh who was patrolling the perimeter outside the wall. For a moment they stared at each other in astonishment and then the Sikh man dropped the match on the ground and fumbled for his rifle. He fired, the bullet whistling harmlessly a foot over Michel's head. Michel knew he could not climb free without getting shot.

There was no choice. He pushed himself back down the hole and began to scramble back, feet first. The dirt showered on his head as the guard caved in the hole with his rifle butt.

He inched back along the tunnel, hoping the guards on this side of the wall didn’t realize what was happening and try to collapse the whole tunnel in on him. He said a silent prayer to his own dark gods and kept going.

♦ ♦ ♦

When Andy woke up in the hospital the morning after he took the Mandrax, everyone was talking about Michel's attempted escape. Two attempts inside a month! It was unheard of. But no one seemed to know if Michel was alive or dead.

When he got back to the prison a guard told him Michel was in ‘maximum security’, a euphemism for a bare earth dungeon deep under the main prison building. Andy bribed one of the guards to let him visit him.

Michel lay inside a dirt cage three feet wide and four feet long, scarcely big enough for a man to squat. Something moved in the darkness. It was a spider. It was the size of a soup plate.

‘Andy,’ Michel murmured.

His eyes blinked open, but he did not move. There were dark stains on his shirt, and his speech was slurred, as if he were drunk.

As Andy’s eyes grew accustomed to the dark he felt his stomach turn. ‘Sweet Jesus Michel. What have they done to you?’

‘It's all right,’ Michel croaked. ‘Nothing broken.’ Michel stretched out a hand between the bars and gripped Andy's wrist. It still retained an astonishing strength. ‘Andy,’ he whispered, ‘I have to get out of here.’

‘Fuck sake, you have to be kidding me!’

‘I want you to get something for me.’

‘Did you hear what I said?’

Michel ignored him. ‘Can you do it? Can you come down here again?’

Andy licked his lips. He was terrified. ‘You need to get your strength back.’

‘No, you have to do it now!’

Andy shook his head. It just didn't seem possible. The man wasn't human. ‘What is it you want?’

♦ ♦ ♦

The chief head warden looked up, annoyed, as one of the guards threw open the door to his office. The insolent bastard had forgotten to knock.

‘What is it?’

The man fired off a sloppy salute. ‘It's the prisoner in maximum security, sir. He's dying.’

The warden threw his pen on the desk in disgust. He was busy composing a letter to the Minister congratulating himself on preventing two

attempted escapes. He didn’t like interruptions. ‘What's wrong with him?’

‘There's blood everywhere, sir. Can't you hear him screaming?’

The warden listened. Well now that he mentioned it, he could hear something. Damn! Perhaps he'd gone too far.

He was not sure whether he should be concerned. The prisoner had a French name, though he looked either Greek or Spanish and had been arrested on board a Thai freighter on route from a Vietnamese port. What nationality was he? His file did not make it clear. If it transpired that Michel was, after all, a European - and with a name like that how could he not be? - then there might be serious repercussions if he died. Only a few days ago an American had died in his cell, and the US consul in Bombay was already raising hell.

Then there was the Canadian who had fallen in the latrines and smashed his skull. Already two deaths within a few weeks of each other. Another one would not look good on his record.

He made up his mind. ‘All right,’ he said, ‘I suppose I'd better have a look.’

He strode down the stone steps leading to the cellars. He could hear the screams much more clearly now. He smiled at the irony of it. He had beaten the clever little bastard unconscious two nights ago, and he hadn't uttered a sound. Perhaps if he had, he would not have been tempted to hit him so hard. The man's intransigence had been his inspiration.

Now the prick was screaming his lungs out.

He stopped in front of the heavy metal door that led to maximum security and waited while the guard fumbled with the keys. It was much cooler down here, and dark, and his nostrils quivered at the stench of putrefaction.

The guard swung open the door and he stepped through, allowing his eyes a few moments to get accustomed to the gloom. There were six cages in all, three on each side of the narrow passage.

Michel was the sole occupant, in the cage on the right at the end of the row. The warden crouched down and peered in. He asked the guard for his torch.

Michel's shirt was dark with blood. It dripped from his mouth and nose in cloying drops, staining his teeth and lips. There were great gouts of it on the dirt floor.

Michel was still screaming.

‘Hemorrhage,’ he hissed. ‘Handcuff him and take him to the hospital. Hurry!’

The doctor at Bombay hospital looked down at the patient on the stretcher and made no attempt to conceal his disgust from the prison guards who had brought him. ‘Another one? What are you people doing over there?’ He bent down to examine the man. He seemed to be only semi-conscious. ‘What happened to him?’

‘A fall,’ one of the guards told him.

‘The floors at the prison must be very slippery.’

The guard shrugged.

‘Take his handcuffs off,’ the doctor said.

‘But the major said ...’

The doctor wheeled on him, white-faced with fury. ‘Take them off! Look at him! This man isn't going to run anywhere in that condition! Take them off!’

The guard meekly complied.

Michel opened one eye and looked around. A shoe box of a room. Who could afford a private bed? A guard sat on a chair by the door, his chin resting on his hands. His .303 rifle was cradled between his knees. He had been sitting there now for almost two hours. He kept dozing off and waking himself again.

Neanderthal! Michel thought.

So far everything had gone well. But this time he would not be quite so eager to stick his head out of the hole. This time he would judge his moment.

Andy had kept his promise. The day after his first visit he had returned with the tin cup and the syringe Michel had asked for. He had bribed a guard to get the syringe; he had not thought Andy's request unusual. Drugs and their prerequisites were in popular demand in the jail. The tin cup had once belonged to Freak.

‘What are you going to do?’ Andy had asked him.

‘It occurred to me that while I was groveling through my tunnel, you were already outside the prison walls.’

‘The hospital?’

‘It seems the best way to get out of any prison is to let the guards to carry you out themselves.’

‘But how …’

‘It doesn't matter how. The least you know about it, the better.’

Andy turned to go. ‘If my father doesn't get me out, send me some money, will you?’

‘Yes, all right.’

‘Promise me?’

‘Yes, I promise.’

‘Okay. Good luck, man.’

After he had gone, Michel waited half an hour, then plunged the needle into a vein in his left arm. He siphoned off a syringe of his own blood and emptied it into the cup. He did it again and again until the cup was full.

Then he raised the cup to his lips and threw back his head, made himself choke on the blood, so that it went everywhere, sprayed up the wall, over his shirt, through his nose.

Then he began to scream.

Michel smiled at how easy it had been. So much easier than scraping away that tunnel with a spoon.

♦ ♦ ♦

It was night. The hospital corridors were quiet after the pandemonium of the day, when the hospital was filled with the shuffling mass of desperate people in their dhotis and home-spun saris, some carrying listless infants in their arms. There were endless lines of them, arms held out in supplication to the harassed, white-coated doctors.

There was a familiar clatter from outside. The guard looked up, hopefully. It was the nightboy. The guard glanced at Michel, who feigned sleep. He got up and went out into the corridor to get a pot of chai.

As soon as he left the room, Michel threw open the wooden locker by the side of the bed. His t-shirt and jeans had been tossed inside. Michel reached into the pocket of his jeans and brought out a handful of pills; the Mandrax.

He lay back on the bed, with the tablets clutched in his right fist. Through slitted eyelids he watched the guard bring the teapot back into the room and settle it on the floor at his feet.

Michel groaned.

The guard looked up, startled. Michel twisted onto his side and groaned again. The guard came over, still clutching the rifle, unsure what to do. Michel gave a sudden yelp of pain, and he took a step back, startled. He hesitated a moment and then went back into the corridor to fetch a nurse.

Michel leaned out of the bed and reached for the teapot. It was only just within reach. He felt the cuffs bite into the flesh of his ankles as he dragged it towards him. He dropped the Mandrax into the brown, milky liquid. Then he pushed it back towards the guard's chair.

When the guard and nurse ran back into the room Michel was lying on his back, apparently sleeping peacefully.

‘You said he was screaming,’ the nurse scolded the guard in Hindi.

‘He was,’ the guard answered, bemused. ‘He was white as a sheet.’

The nurse picked up Michel's wrist and checked his pulse, holding her other hand to his forehead. ‘Pulse and temperature are both normal. Perhaps he was just shouting out in his sleep.’

‘Perhaps,’ the guard agreed.

The nurse frowned in irritation. ‘There's nothing wrong with him,’ she said, and marched out of the room.

The guard shrugged, sat down, and picked up the pot of chai. He poured some into a tin cup. He sipped it and resumed his position: with his chin on his hands, rifle between his knees. He yawned.

It was going to be a long night.

Ten minutes later he slumped from the chair, falling heavily forwards on his face, his rifle clattering onto the tiled floor beside him.

Michel leaned out of bed, reached for the key ring attached to the guard's belt, and twisted it free. He prayed the nurse did not come back on her rounds in the next few minutes. He unlocked the shackles around his ankles, slid off the bed, and pulled the jeans and the bloodied T-shirt from the cupboard beside the bed.

A few minutes later he walked out of the front gates of the hospital. It had been six weeks to the day since he had been arrested. He was once more at liberty to resume his relationship with his father.

CHAPTER 19

Bombay

The city of Bombay was built on the narrow neck of a peninsula jutting into the Arabian Sea. Crowded bazaars and ragged, squalid slums clustered beneath the gleaming plate-glass of the high rises on Nariman Point. The air was clamorous with the blaring horns of the traffic snarled in its streets, and the pavements were pockmarked with rotting garbage. Sacred cows jostled for space alongside the scabrous beggars, the women in their twirling saris and businessmen in western suits scurrying to appointments.

The sprawling tenement *chawls* and pavement hovels were testimony to a burgeoning population that had come to Bombay to search for its dreams and found only disease and overcrowding. But still they poured in from the surrounding countryside, at a rate of six thousand new families per day.

The gaudy, garlanded images of Ganesh were everywhere, the plump and baby-limbed god with the head of an elephant. It was Bombay's icon, the Hindu god of money and luck and prosperity. Bombay was India’s New York.

The population was cosmopolitan, drawn from every race in India; in the markets people spoke Hindi, Marathi, Gujarati, Tamil, Telugu, Sindhi, Kannada and English; there were churches and shrines for Hindus, Moslems, Catholics, Buddhists, Jains, Parsees, Sikhs and Jews. Foreigners came from everywhere: wealthy Arabs from the Gulf States, hippies from San Francisco, wealthy and plump tourists from the Mid-West, elegantly tailored businessmen from France and Germany.

In such a melting pot of humanity, Michel Christian became instantly invisible.

♦ ♦ ♦

He sauntered out of the gates and walked for about an hour through the night streets, putting distance between himself and the hospital. Then he

curled up on the pavement, at the end of a long line of huddled, blanketed shapes. He was asleep instantly.

He woke to a grey and sticky dawn. Rumpled ragged toddlers, doe-eyed and solemn, played in the street beside their still sleeping parents. Bodies rose from the shadowy lines of blankets like ghosts and joined the long line of people milling around a water pump, collecting water for the day in bowls and empty kerosene tins. The Indian shopkeepers joined them on the pavement, urinating in the gutters and cleaning their teeth with their fingers using white monkey powder.

Mission workers collected the night's dead and dumped them outside the taxi rank while a frail nun in a blue habit walked along the line making the sign of the cross over each of them.

It's so easy to give up, Michel thought. But I will survive.

For Joginder’s sake.

For Adrienne’s sake.

As the sun rose he washed his face under the water pump and headed back into the city. Within an hour the sleeping city had been transformed into a honking, chanting kaleidoscope of dust and sun and traffic and people and smog.

Michel found his way to the Victoria terminus, Bombay's central railway station, a dirty Victorian Gothic edifice, impossibly ornate, surrounded by hordes of beggars and black and yellow taxis.

He fought his way through the chaos and went inside. The terminus was packed with travelers, rich and poor, struggling through the crowds with their luggage or lying or squatting, wherever there was space, exhausted by the delays and the crowds.

Within a few minutes he had quickly and expertly rifled the backpack of a sleeping Canadian student. When he walked out of the terminus he had travelers' checks worth a hundred Canadian dollars and a cheap Instamatic camera. He sold them on the street an hour later and bought himself some new clothes - jeans, sandals and an embroidered white cotton shirt - and then wolfed down three helpings of shrimp curry and *pau bhaji* in a restaurant opposite the terminus.

Now he was ready to begin.

♦ ♦ ♦

In a city of four million people Michel knew that he could have never found his father with just a name, but he suspected there would be just one Saigon and Bombay Tailoring Company.

In fact there were two. They both belonged to his father. It took him two days, but he found them.

♦ ♦ ♦

The pock-skinned Hindu youth in the white linen shirt and fresh blue *dhoti* studied him with suspicion. ‘My father's not here,’ he said, in crisp, Oxford English. ‘Who are you?’

Michel looked over the boy's shoulder to the dim, cool shadows of the tailor's shop. He saw a short, plump Indian woman, a brace of tiny rubies glinting from her left nostril, and some seamstresses bent over their work.

Michel ignored the question. ‘Where is he?’

‘He went back to Saigon. Two days ago.’

‘Saigon?’ So, he had been here. He shrugged away his disappointment. Their joyful reunion would be slightly delayed, that’s all.

‘Who are you?’ the youth repeated.

‘No one,’ Michel answered, and he realized with hollow irony that it was true.

But that would all change.

♦ ♦ ♦

That afternoon Michel threaded his way through the maze of cheap hotels and restaurants in Colaba, at the south end of Back Bay. It was the travelers' quarter of the city, a colony of hippies in bright-patterned clothes, head bands, beads and bracelets. Michel was fascinated by them.

The only Westerners he had ever seen were rich, self-assured, arrogant. These young people were different. Some of them were young and fresh-faced, others looked worn and hardened by drugs and the road. They would be easy prey for a practiced pocket thief, but he discounted them as a solution to the problem he now faced.

It was no longer a question of just surviving. He could not stay in Bombay. The police would be looking for him, and if they sent him back to

the prison he wouldn’t get out alive. Not this time. He needed money, and he needed a lot of it.

The red-domed Taj overlooked the Gateway of India; it was Bombay’s iconic hotel. Porters in festive turbans fussed around the Mercedes and BMW's that pulled up in its forecourt day and night. Oil-rich Arabs and Western businessmen in silk suits strolled the lobby. The place reeked of money.

Michel put his hands in his pockets and climbed the huge granite staircase to the Harbor Bar. He sat down, ordered a Golden Eagle beer and waited. The windows afforded a panoramic view of Elephanta Island and the rusting ships anchored in the roadstead. He wondered if the SS Siam was one of them.

He took stock: all he had left in the world were the crumbled remains of the Mandrax, and those unique talents he had learned on the streets of Saigon. He reckoned they would be more than enough.

He looked across the room. There was a girl sitting in the corner, watching him. She turned away as soon as he saw her, but he knew enough by now to know what that look meant. He got up and went over.

Alana Regan was not a pretty girl, in the classic sense. Her nose was perhaps a little too broad and her mousy hair was dyed black. But nature had compensated in other ways; she had narrow hips and extravagantly heavy breasts. She had learned to exaggerate their effect by wearing very tight white t-shirts.

Despite this apparent brazenness, Alana Regan's closeted upbringing as the only daughter of a widowed matron in Baton Rouge meant she could be somewhat shy around men. She had followed in her mother’s footsteps and become a nurse at the local hospital.

But when Alana was twenty-three she had applied - and been accepted - for the position of a private nurse to an Arabian oil sheikh in Oman. Her mother was horrified. Over her objections she left Baton Rouge and spent

the next twelve months in the Middle East. She loved every moment of it. The Arabian men had made her feel like a movie star.

When her contract expired she decided to see a little more of the world before returning to Louisiana. She had fallen briefly and tempestuously in love with a diplomat's son in Beirut, a handsome Spaniard with a husky voice, sweet-scented skin and sensuously drooping eyelids. He was different from any other man she had known. Or so she thought. But just like the clumsy and beer-breathed boys at home, he dumped her like a used Kleenex. The love of her life lasted just three weeks.

Won't I ever learn? she asked herself. If there was a user in the room, that was the one she seemed to go for.

She flew to India just to see the Taj Mahal. Then she meandered south, delaying the inevitable return to a regular life in Louisiana. When she got to Bombay she decided to pamper herself with an overnight stay at the famous Taj Hotel, even though she heard that just one night cost more than an Indian laborer earned in a year. But she could afford it. She had earned big dollars in Oman.

After checking into her room, she wandered for a while around the Apollo Bunder, but finally, too tired and too hot to be bothered with the hawkers and beggars that pestered her every step, she retreated to the Harbor Bar for a cold drink.

She noticed the young man in the blue jeans straight away. Who wouldn’t? For one thing he was outrageously good-looking with coffee skin, flowing dark hair and hypnotic brown eyes. But he was also no pretty boy; it looked like he had been in a fight not too long ago and his face had not quite healed. It made him look dangerous.

It was a combination she had always found hard to resist.

He sat alone at the bar with a bottle of beer and Alana wondered who, or what, he was. He could have been Greek, but his eyes were too narrow. He might have been Japanese, but he was too tall. He could have been Indian, a film star perhaps, like the ones that lived in those white palaces on Malabar Hill. Only film stars didn’t get bruises on their face like that.

Suddenly he turned around, saw her and smiled. Instinctively, she looked away. It didn’t matter, he came over anyway.

‘Hello,’ he said, his voice heavily accented with French, ‘are you alone?’

She nodded.

He sat down, took the packet of Stuyvesant off the table in front of her and, without asking, he shook one out of the packet. He lit it with one of the cardboard matches she had brought from her hotel room.

‘Michel,’ he said.

Her throat was suddenly very dry. ‘Alana.’

He gave her a smile of powder-white intensity and leaned towards her. ‘Tell me, Alana,’ he murmured, ‘do you believe in Fate?’

♦ ♦ ♦

‘Room 210,’ Michel murmured sleepily into the phone. ‘Send up two Western-style breakfasts. And a large pot of coffee.’

He put down the phone and padded naked to the bathroom. He took a long hot shower, leaning his head against the smooth tiles, eyes tight shut.

There was a knock at the door. Michel wrapped a towel around his waist and, still dripping, took the breakfast tray from an elderly Indian in a pressed white uniform.

‘Wait a moment,’ Michel said. He went to Alana's purse, took out two small coins and tossed them at him. He caught one, the other fell on the carpet. Michel enjoyed watching him scramble to pick it up.

He closed the door and went to the table in the corner of the room. He unfolded a crisp copy of the Times of India. It was early morning and down on Sassoon dock the fishermen were unloading their catch from their red-and-white-sailed fishing dhows.

Michel opened the paper, looked for the news from Saigon. It was Tet in Vietnam. This year the truce had been called for just thirty-six hours. It had ended that morning. The reports consisted of the usual claims and counter-claims of truce-breaking from both sides.

Michel read, steadily eating his way through the two breakfasts of rolls, eggs, bacon, and cereals. He poured himself another cup of coffee from the ornate silver pot and went to stand by the bed.

The girl was dead. She lay on her stomach, one arm hanging limp over the side of the bed. She could have been asleep, except for the blue-ish tinge to her lips.

Michel shrugged. It was a pity.

He supposed he must have put too much Mandrax in her wine. It was French and inordinately expensive, of course, but she had insisted on

paying for it. In the end it had cost her more than she had bargained for.

He dressed leisurely, then went to the dressing table and sorted through her leather shoulder bag, spilling its contents on the polished surface. He pocketed the travelers' checks, and four hundred rupees in cash.

There was even a round-the-world air ticket. Perfect.

Then, he found the real treasure; he caressed the smooth green cover of the passport as tenderly as a lover and slid it into the back pocket of his jeans.

'Thank you, Alana,' he said aloud. 'A most enjoyable evening.'

For some reason he found himself thinking of his mother. She had been slim, dark, and very, very pretty. This girl was none of those things.

Still, he was somehow glad she was dead.

♦ ♦ ♦

Early next morning a Pan Am 747 touched down at Tan Son Nhut airbase in Saigon, and an American national named Alana Regan stepped on to the boiling tarmac. Inside the terminal the uniformed Vietnamese official at passport control did not ask why the tall, dark-haired man on the other side of the counter had a girl's name in his passport.

Foreign names were unintelligible to him.

So, a few minutes later, Michel climbed into a taxi outside Tan Son Nhut, anticipating a joyful reunion with his father.

CHAPTER 20

Saigon

Tet, the Lunar New Year. For the Vietnamese it was the year’s major festival, Christmas and Easter packed into four days. The Vietnamese did not celebrate individual birthdays; at Tet, everyone became one year older.

No one went to work, the markets were closed. Houses were filled with flowers and everyone dressed in new clothes. Even the street children begged or stole a new shirt or a new pair of pants.

The air was filled with the din of flashes and bangs from the firecrackers that chased away evil spirits. Merchants spent vast sums hanging long strings of them outside their shops believing the more they had, the more business they would attract in the coming year.

Tet: it was a time to celebrate, and to feast. A time to visit one's family and pay off all old debts. A time to honor one's ancestors.

♦ ♦ ♦

It was a hot, desolate afternoon. Nguyen Hue street, the Street of Flowers, was a mass of color. The appearance of these flowers every year seemed almost miraculous in a country pocked with bomb craters, vast expanses of defoliated jungle and rice paddies with barbed wire perimeters.

Michel took a suite at the Continental Hotel. When he retired that evening he could hear the distant *crump-crump-crump* of shellfire, but it was mostly drowned out by the whirring of the ceiling fan. The war was like a bad habit, and it seemed a long way away. He was accustomed to it now. Everyone called it Saigon Night Music.

He had heard the rumors of an impending attack on Saigon by the VC, but he had discounted them.

He didn't see how it was possible.

♦ ♦ ♦

He woke around two in the morning to the sound of sharp, whip-like explosions from the street outside. At first, he thought it was firecrackers, but then there was another, bigger blast and his bedroom window turned white and fell in, showering the bed with shards of glass. Michel rolled off the bed and lay flat on the floor.

Another explosion rolled across the square and the curtains billowed in the second blast.

Keeping low, Michel went to the balcony and peered down into the street. He saw half a dozen Vietnamese dressed in black pajamas and carrying AK- 47s pour out of a manhole cover, like ants from a crumbled nest.

They ran off in the direction of the US embassy.

Viet Cong! So for once the rumors were true.

He heard more gunfire from across the street, saw one of the Viet Cong stumble and fall. A grenade exploded in the square, and a piece of shrapnel slapped into the wall of the hotel, just a few feet above his head.

Michel crawled back inside, fumbled in the darkness for his clothes. He supposed most people in the city tonight were terrified by what was happening in the street; but then he was not like most people. There was opportunity here. A night like this, with guns and explosions going off everywhere, a man could get away with murder.

♦ ♦ ♦

As dawn broke, the Saigon streets were utterly deserted. The usual clamor of horns and bicycle bells and hawkers had been replaced by the clatter of small arms fire and the sudden, ear-shattering explosions of mortars and rockets. Joginder saw a squad of Marines crouching behind an overturned jeep. Shadowy figures in black pajamas ducked into an alleyway further down the street.

Joginder scampered along the arcade, a voluminous white handkerchief flapping in his right fist. When the attack started he had been asleep in his favorite brothel, five blocks away. He would have cowered there all week if he had to, but he was worried about leaving his shop unattended.

There were twenty million piastres in the small iron safe upstairs.

A Citroen was skewed across the middle of the street, its coachwork punched through with bullet holes. Joginder stepped over the bodies of three VC sprawled on the footpath. A cloud of flies rose into the air, buzzing angrily at this interruption. Joginder noticed they wore white cotton shirts and even jewelry underneath their black pajamas. They must be cadres, ordinary Saigonese who had just been waiting for a chance to fight.

He saw the glitter of a gold chain at one of the men's throats and bent down to rip it off, before hurrying on.

There was firing from the direction of the US embassy. He would have to get off the main street. It would take him longer to get home, but it might be safer. On the Tu Do he was too tempting a target for Viet Cong snipers as well as nervous Marines.

Get me home, he prayed silently. O Ganesh, get me home and I will make a great sacrifice in your honor!

When he finally reached his shop he didn't risk the street entrance. Instead he went to the wooden gate that led on to the small courtyard beside it. He hammered on it with his fists. 'Sai, it is me, Joginder! Let me in!'

There was no answer from inside. He tried the handle, and to his surprise, it swung open. He almost fainted with alarm. He was sure he had locked it when he went out that previous evening.

It had been forced. Someone had broken in during the night.

Viet Cong!

His first instinct was to run. But where to?

And what about the safe?

He eased open the door with his foot. It swung half-way and stopped. Something was stopping it from opening the whole way. He peered inside. One of Sai's boys, her eldest, lay face down on the floor.

There was blood everywhere.

Joginder put his handkerchief to his mouth and retched.

'Joginder! Up here!'

He reeled back in surprise. It was Sai. She was upstairs.

'What's happening?' he shouted.

'The VC were here! Quickly!'

'Have they gone?'

'Yes, it's safe now. Hurry!'

He ran up the back stairs, tripped over another body. Shivering with fright, he stared at the smear of blood on his hands.

Savages. They had murdered both the children.

‘Sai?’

‘Jogi, help me!’

Perhaps they've tied her up, he thought. Did they torture her and make her tell them where the money was?

He wiped away the blood with his handkerchief and stumbled the rest of the way up the stairs to his office.

Sai was sitting behind his desk, white as chalk, a strange look on her face. ‘What happened?’ he said.

She didn't answer him.

He ignored her and rushed across the room to the safe. It was still securely locked. He groaned with relief. He was afraid the VC might have tried to blast it open.

He felt something hard nestle into the small indentation at the base of his skull. Then he heard a familiar voice, very close to his ear. ‘Father. How nice to see you again.’

♦ ♦ ♦

‘Sit down in that chair.’

‘Michel?’

‘Are you surprised to see me.’

Joginder thought he was going to lose control of his bowels. This was impossible; Michel was in the Port of Bombay jail. No one ever got out of there.

‘Sit down,’ Michel repeated.

His legs wouldn’t hold him, so he crawled. ‘Get out of the way!’ Michel said, and Sai did as she was told, backing into a corner of the room, relieved that she was no longer the one this madman was pointing his gun at. Michel grabbed Joginder by the collar and threw him into the chair.

He was holding the service revolver he had taken from the holster of a dead ARVN on Tu Do street. He pulled back the hammer and rammed the barrel between his father’s eyes.

‘No!’ Joginder shrieked. ‘Please!’

A stain spread across the crotch of his trousers and a puddle formed under his chair.

‘I'll do anything. Do you want money? I'll pay you ...’

‘Shut up.’ Michel looked up at Sai. ‘Come here,’ he said. He threw her the length of wire twine he had taken from one of the rolls of cloth in the shop. ‘Tie his wrists behind his back. Make sure it’s tight. If his fingers don't turn white, I'll shoot off one of your toes.’

Sai did as she was told. The tailor yelped with pain. ‘You're hurting me, you bitch!’

Michel gave Sai a tight, humorless smile. ‘I don’t think you like him anymore than I do, do you? Now step back against the wall.’

She backed off, her eyes never leaving the gun. She had watched this monster gun down her sons. She knew he wouldn’t hesitate to do the same to her.

Michel perched himself on the corner of the desk.

‘Please . . . Michel ...’

‘Shut up.’ Michel hit him with the barrel to make his point. Blood started to leak down his face from his scalp. Joginder began to cry, softly.

‘I have often asked myself why you did what you did. Now I know. There are few fathers who have the opportunity to abandon their children twice.’

‘I have money. How much do you want? You gain nothing by killing me. Don't you see?’

‘Perhaps.’

‘That's right. I don't deny you have cause to hate me, but think of the money. How much do you want? Just name your price.’

‘How much is in the safe?’ Michel said.

Joginder swallowed hard. Twenty million piastres! Of course, his life was worth more than that, but he had to try and stall him. ‘What do you want?’

‘Everything you have.’

My money! I can’t let him have all that money! It’s mine!

Michel smiled and held the barrel against Joginder’s crotch.

‘Open the safe!’

Sai knelt next to the steel box, and Joginder recited the numbers to her. His voice came out in a squeak. Twenty million piastres!

‘Seven-three-to the right. Ninety-five-to the right. Sixty-three-to the left. Now back again. Eighty-eight.’

He heard the tumblers click and fall. The door swung open.

‘Put it all on the table,’ Michel said.

Sai obliged, piling the bundles of notes on the desk like bricks. All that money, all that work, all gone. After all these years that damned French whore was going to cost him everything.

Michel threw an airline bag at Sai. ‘Put it in there,’ he told her. ‘His passport as well.’

‘Please, not all of it,’ Joginder whimpered.

‘Take off his rings,’ Michel said.

It was useless to plead with this cold-hearted bastard. But as long as he let him live.

Sai pulled the fat emerald-cut ruby from the little finger of his left hand and the ruby signet ring from the third finger of the other.

‘If you'll just take these and go I promise I—’

‘This is not repayment. Did you really think that? This is my inheritance, that’s all.’

‘Please, Michel … ‘

‘You sent me to hell, father. If it wasn’t for the nuns I would have starved. I spent most of life sleeping in bombed-out buildings with rats eating my feet. Even that was better than the Indian prison. Do you know what they did to me, father? The warden spread-eagled me naked across a desk and beat me for two hours with a rubber hose and a brass belt buckle.’

The gun shook in Michel's hand.

‘No,’ Joginder said, and a rope of saliva spilled from his bottom lip and dribbled down his chin.

Sai finished packing the thick bundles of paper money into the airline bag. Michel snatched it from her, keeping the gun aimed at Joginder's head. ‘What sort of man would do that to his own son?’

Joginder tried to speak but all that came out was a squeak. I have to stop him, he thought. A vague plan formed in his mind, where he would launch himself from his chair and fling himself headlong across the room and snatch the gun away. But his legs would not obey him. He felt paralyzed.

‘So many nights I lay awake dreaming of this moment, Father.’

He closed his eyes.

There was a loud bang and Joginder screamed, waiting for the pain.

Nothing.

He opened his eyes. Michel was laughing. ‘Just a grenade, Father. The VC have their war. I have mine.’

He looked at Sai, aimed the revolver and casually shot her in the head.

Joginder heard her heels rattle on the floor and he became aware of a terrible stench. He realized he had soiled himself.

A grenade exploded in the street. ‘Listen to it,’ Michel said. ‘The VC are taking over the whole city. There are dead and dying everywhere. It seems I am the only one who takes the festival seriously, the only one in all of Saigon who wants to forget about the war with the Americans and simply give my ancestors their due.’’

Michel held the gun low, at his hip. He fired once into Joginder’s right knee and then, as he lay howling on the floor, he casually fired another round into the other one.

Michel picked up the airline bag and went back down the stairs into the war- ravaged streets.

It was almost a week before civilian aircraft were once again cleared to fly out of Tan Son Nhut. During that time Michel took refuge inside the Continental Hotel. On the other side of the city Joginder Krisnan lay in hospital bed, heavily sedated. During his few lucid moments, he raved to the doctors and nurses about a man who had murdered his family and then tied him up and tortured him. No one took any notice of him. The medical staff supposed it was a side effect of the strong narcotics. Anyway, the police and the military were fully occupied with tracking down the last of the Viet Cong cells.

And so Alana Regan flew unmolested out of Saigon, aboard a Cathay Pacific flight for Hong Kong. Once in Kowloon Michel booked into a luxury suite in the Peninsula Hotel and toasted his inheritance with fine French champagne, while he pondered his next move.

He made himself two promises:

He would never be poor again, not ever.

The second promise he made was that he would find his mother. Wherever she was in the world, he would track her down. No matter what it cost.

PART FOUR

Reunion 1972

CHAPTER 21

Paris

Some people think Interpol is an international police force, whose bailiwick transcends national boundaries. Nothing could be further from the truth. It would be more accurately described as an international clearing house, dedicated to police work.

Its agents, however, are powerless to make arrests or even interrogate suspects; they merely act as advisers and intermediaries to the police forces of other nations.

Its headquarters is in St Cloud, a suburb of Paris about three kilometers from the Eiffel Tower. It is housed in an anonymous grey office block near the Longchamps racecourse. Only the occasional commuter train rumbling past on the near-by tracks disturbs the peaceful, leafy calm. The only thing slightly unusual about the building is the profusion of radio antennae and transmitters on its roof.

Inside, the office exhibits the Spartan anonymity of police stations the world over: metal desks piled high with papers, plastic chairs, cramped cubicles.

The organization has three divisions: General Administration, Research and Study, and International Police Co-operation. This last division is further divided into five groups: international fraud; counterfeiting; bank fraud and forgery; drug trafficking; and murder and theft.

Each group has a certain number of liaison officers responsible for coordinating police efforts in specific global areas. The Liaison Officer for South-East Asia that cold March afternoon was Captain René Budjinski.

Budjinski had served seventeen years working homicide in the sixth *arrondissement*. Before that, he had been a member of the French SDECE in Indochina. He had nicotine-stained fingers and his face was pockmarked with ancient acne pits. He wore a crumpled oyster-grey suit, the seat and elbows shiny with wear; his collar was open, and the tie pulled down. Anyone who saw him on the street would have been excused for mistaking him for a poorly paid insurance clerk.

But Interpol did not pay Budjinski for his dress sense. His talent was for chasing down information with the tenacity of a bulldog and then sifting an enormous amount of detail into a few important and significant facts.

That afternoon he sat at his cluttered and ash-strewn desk and stared at a cable he had received an hour earlier from Singapore.

He leaned back in his chair and lit another *Gauloise*. By itself it meant nothing, an act of desperation from a beleaguered detective without a single lead. Hundreds of similar cables flooded into St Cloud every week:

28/12/71
TO: IP PARIS
WE WISH TO INFORM YOU OF A ROBBERY REPORTED ON 28/12/71 A T MANDARIN HOTEL STOP ROBBERY PERPETRATED BY PERSON OR PERSONS UNKNOWN STOP OWNER OF ARCADE JEWELRY STORE LURED TO ROOM AND KNOCKED UNCONSCIOUS STOP OCCUPIER OF ROOM MURDERED STOP NOW POSITIVELY IDENTIFIED AS AMERICAN TOURIST SUSAN CONNORS OF HOUSTON TEXAS STOP
WE STILL WISH TO QUESTION A MAN SUSPECTED OF INVOLVEMENT IN THIS CRIME STOP PROBABLE FOREIGN NATIONAL 20-25 YEARS OF LATIN DESCENT SIX FOOT DARK HAIR USES THE NAME ALAN REGAN STOP
REQUEST URGENT ASSISTANCE IN LOCATING THIS PERSON STOP IF DETAINED EXTRADITION WILL BE REQUESTED STOP
END IP SINGAPORE
SIGNED: ROLAND TAN (CHIEF SUPERINTENDENT)
SINGAPORE POLICE (INTERPOL DIVISION)

Budjinski checked the date again; December 28th, almost three months ago. Another report delayed by some oversight or bureaucratic bungling. Not that it made much difference.

He would put out an all-stations alert and then send the cable upstairs to Records.

He put the cable to one side, stubbed out his *Gauloise* and moved on to the next message.

Serge Renard rented a small office on the Rue St Lazare, up two flights of narrow steps. He was a stocky Breton with a thick cap of very black hair, cut close to the skull. He sat at his desk and weighed a thin manila folder in his hands. Four years and this was all they had to show. He wondered how long his client would continue to pay his retainer.

He remembered the first day the man had come to his office. It was clear that money was not going to be a problem; he wore a Patek Phillipe watch with diamonds inlaid in the face - worth two thousand dollars at least by his reckoning - a Pierre Cardin suit, a shirt of Egyptian cotton and a muted grey Sulka tie. He looked very young to have so much money. He guessed he had a rich daddy somewhere.

It had been difficult to guess the man's nationality. He spoke French perfectly, but his dark complexion and those hypnotic brown eyes suggested mixed blood. He guessed straight off that this case would be outside the normal round of jealous husbands or suspicious employers.

‘What can I do for you?’ he had asked.

‘I need to find someone.’

‘Why?’

‘That is my business.’

‘As you wish,’ Renard demurred.

‘Her maiden name is Adrienne Christian. Her father was an official in the *Service Publique* in Saigon in the late forties. She left in 1951 or 52.’

Renard scribbled some notes on a pad. ‘And then?’

‘That is all I know.’

‘Excuse me?’

‘It’s all I have.’

‘*M’sieur,* excuse me, but that is not very much to go on.’ He dropped his pen on the desk. ‘When did you last see this woman?’

‘Is that relevant?’

‘Then may I at least ask her relation to you?’

‘Will that help you find her?’

‘It might.’

‘How?’

Renard tossed his pencil onto his pad. ‘Is she married?’

‘She was only 23 or 24 when she left Saigon. I should think so.’

‘And you do not know the name of the man she married?’

‘If I did, I would have told you.’

‘Is this woman living here in France?’

‘Perhaps.’

Renard leaned back, his index finger tapping out a tattoo on the arm of his chair. ‘I have connections in Saigon who could perhaps look through the birth and marriage records for me. If they exist. Many were lost after Partition. If we can find her new name, I may be able to do something for you. But it will be expensive.’

The young man reached into his wallet and produced a thick bundle of notes. He threw them across the desk. ‘I don't care what it costs. Find her.’

Renard counted how much was there and raised an eyebrow. ‘You must want to find this woman very badly.’

‘You have no idea, *m’sieur*,’ he had said and walked out.

♦ ♦ ♦

That was four years ago. As Renard had predicted both the birth and marriage records had been lost or destroyed in the chaos of 1954 when the French pulled out of Saigon. After many weeks of fruitless research he had tracked down a Emmanuel Christian through public service records. The man had been a *fonctionnaire* in the colonial administration and was killed in a bombing there in 1951.

After that, nothing. For three years he had found nothing but false trails.

Renard wondered how much this fruitless investigation had been worth to him. Hundreds of thousands of francs, certainly. What was so important about this woman that this man would continue to pay such huge sums to a private investigator?

Each month an envelope would arrive at his office with an Asian postmark, and inside would be a check covering his retainer. His mysterious client would not give a forwarding address. But every few months Renard would get a long-distance phone call from him; occasionally he would just appear in his reception, unannounced, and enquire about his progress.

Renard put the file in a drawer and moved on to his other business.

A fascinating case, and certainly his most difficult. In some ways he would be glad to have finished with it. But he would miss the money.

CHAPTER 22

New Delhi

Noelle Giresse stood at the window of her suite in the Ashoka Hotel and watched the moon rise over the old city. It hung low over the Red Fort, the color of blood. The air was scented with flowers and dust.

The Ashoka had been built by Nehru, an extravagant gesture to celebrate the birth of the new nation, intended to impress the world leaders who had come to India to court the new order. Noelle loved its faded charm. It was like being back in the days of the Raj.

It was the beginning of the dry season, when the sun broiled the dun, skillet-hard earth until it crumbled and cracked. Not the best time to visit India. And yet as soon as Noelle stepped off the 747 at Palam international airport she felt as if she was coming home.

It had been almost seventeen years since she was last here. At thirty-seven she still turned heads, slim and graceful with ash-blonde hair and soft hazel-brown eyes. In her youth she had been called beautiful; now, she suspected she might be called ‘attractive’. An attractive French divorcee.

Her cigarette glowed in the dark shadows of the balcony.

The divorce had been a bitter and protracted affair. She had had no illusions about what it was going to be like when she begun the proceedings, of course. She had watched her own parents tear each other apart when she was sixteen. She had not expected her own separation to be any different.

She had met Jacques in Paris. She was a model then, and he was studying business at the Sorbonne. He wore long woolen scarves and horn-rimmed spectacles that made him look like an owl. He had courted her clumsily, but he seemed so earnest and sincere that she encouraged his attentions. It wasn't until much later that she learned that he had thought he was patronizing her.

They didn't become lovers until after university. By then Jacques was a stockbroker with a firm on the Bourse des Valeurs, the French stock exchange, and had given up his scarves and spectacles for a three-piece suit and contact lenses.

When they decided to marry both parents opposed the match. His told him he was marrying beneath his class. Her father was a little more blunt. He told her that Jacques was a selfish, obstinate and self-obsessed.

You should know, she thought at the time.

They went ahead and married anyway. ‘We will show them,’ she told Jacques one night as they walked hand-in-hand along the Avenue de l'Opéra, ‘love can overcome anything.’

Perhaps. But it did not overcome infertility. Her husband espoused traditional values; he wanted an attractive wife who could grace his arm at social gatherings and he wanted a male heir. That was what love meant to him.

When it was over, her father resisted the urge to gloat. After all, the marriage had lasted much longer than he had predicted. He helped her deal with Jacques’ lawyers, and gave her a place to stay and a shoulder to cry on.

The one good thing to come from it all was the rebuilding of bridges between herself and her father. He had always seemed so cold, but when she needed him he had come through for her.

Coming back to Asia had been partly his idea; there had been a substantial settlement and he suggested that now it was over she should take a long holiday. She had always loved India; her father had been attached to the embassy in New Delhi for many years when he was with the diplomatic service.

Michel had been an unexpected complication. She had seen him several times in the foyer. It was impossible not to notice him. Then the previous afternoon she had been sitting in the shaded garden, sipping a gin and tonic, when she was aware of someone standing by her shoulder. She assumed it was the waiter. She drained her glass and held it out without looking up from the letter in her hand.

‘Yes, I'll have another,’ she said in English.

‘*Mon plaîsir,*’ a voice answered, in French. She looked up in confusion. The man was tall, dark-skinned and very handsome.

‘Oh ... I'm sorry ... I thought ...’

Michel disappeared inside. Noelle watched him go to the bar and order her another drink. What should she do? She could go back to her room, head off the inevitable pick-up. But that would be too rude. When he returned she would thank him for the drink, make some polite conversation and leave. There needn't be any more to it than that.

Unless she wanted there to be.

She put down the letter, smoothed down her dress with her hands. She suddenly felt nervous, a schoolgirl again. This was ridiculous.

‘A gin and tonic.’ Michel put the glass in front of her and eased himself into the cane chair opposite her. He wore an open-necked white silk Cardin shirt and Givenchy jeans. He had on soft grey Gucci loafers and there was a fat emerald-cut ruby on his little finger. He looked like a movie star. There was a horribly expensive watch on his wrist. It looked as if it was studded with diamonds.

‘Tell me, do I look like a drinks waiter? Is it this white shirt?’

‘No, I didn’t see you, I just … I mean, I didn't look up. You were just standing there. I apologize.’

‘I was admiring you.’

You were undressing me with your eyes, she thought., She picked up her gin and tonic, then quickly put it back on the table when she realized her hands were shaking. A long time since she had let a man seduce her. She tried to recover her poise. ‘Am I supposed to be flattered?’ She fumbled in her handbag for her cigarettes.

‘You are, aren't you?’ He reached into his pocket and took out a gold Dupont lighter. He lit her cigarette for her. ‘Your name's Noelle Giresse. You live in Paris, and you are very beautiful.’

‘How did you know that?’

‘I asked the desk clerk. For your name, anyway. The other . . . well the other is obvious. I have been watching you. And you have been watching me.’

Noelle stared at him. ‘Nonsense,’ she said. He certainly didn’t lack self-confidence. He was young, perhaps ten years younger than her. It was obvious what he wanted. Perhaps it’s what I want too, she thought. Especially all those years I was faithful to Jacques, even when he'd practically flaunted his mistresses in my face.

‘You haven't told me your name.’

‘Michel.’

‘That's French isn't it? You don’t look French.’

‘I'm a citizen of the world.’ He leaned forward and his eyes seemed to bore into hers. ‘I can be whatever you want me to be.’

‘I'm sure I don't know what you mean.’

Michel looked down at the letter on the table. ‘Would you rather I went away? Perhaps you would prefer to finish reading your mail.’

‘Perhaps.’

‘It is from your husband?’

‘No, my father. My husband and I were divorced last month.’

‘I'm sorry.’

‘Don't be. He was a bastard.’

‘Ah. Then I am sorry for that.’

‘I shouldn't be telling you all this.’

‘Then why are you?’

Noelle decided she didn't like this man after all. He was too brash, too direct. She didn't like his questions. ‘I don't know. Why does anyone do anything?’

Unbelievably he had leaned towards her and took one of her hands in his. ‘Tell me, Noelle, do you believe in Fate?’

♦ ♦ ♦

Noelle stubbed out her cigarette and turned away from the balcony. If she had disliked him so intensely why could she not stop thinking about him?

There was a knock on the door. She turned on the bedside lamp and checked her look in the mirror. ‘Who is it?’

‘Michel.’

Michel? She sank down onto the edge of the bed. She felt a rush of excitement and apprehension. If you hadn’t wanted him to come to your room, Noelle, you shouldn’t have given him your room number.

She fidgeted with the collar of her dressing gown.

His voice again, more urgent now. ‘Noelle?’

She got up and opened the door.

He was leaning on the door jamb. He gave her a mocking smile. ‘Did I wake you up?’

‘I couldn't sleep.’

‘Neither could I.’

He moved past her into the room and Noelle locked the door.

He stood in the middle of the room, his hands thrust deep into his pockets, looking around. He began to unbutton his shirt. ‘Turn off the light.’

‘Let's leave it on.’

‘Turn it off.’

Noelle shrugged and turned off the lamp. She heard the rustle of his clothes as they fell to the floor. The moon had risen higher in the sky now, its red color had faded to pink, framed by the French windows.

He led her into the bedroom and sat down beside her on the bed, let her touch him first. His skin felt cool and smooth, the muscles taut and hard. She liked that. Her husband had been fleshy and soft. She traced the flat contours of his belly down to his thigh and her fingers brushed against his penis. He was hard already. He must want her very badly; something else she had not experienced for a very long time.

Michel untied the cord of the dressing gown. He eased the silk over her shoulders and then his strong hands clamped her wrists to the bed. She felt his lips brush her throat and breasts.

His tongue traced the curve of her belly. Jacques had never liked doing this; he only liked her doing it to him. She gasped aloud. Oh, he was good. He was very, very good. Young, hard and he had a nimble tongue, in and out of bed. A girlfriend had been telling her for years that what she needed was a good fuck. It looked as if she had found it.

She closed her eyes and surrendered.

♦ ♦ ♦

When she woke up the bed was empty. She reached out for him and when she realized he was gone she felt both disappointed and relieved.

The blinds were drawn. She could see the sun through a gap in the drapes. It must be late. She shivered. Before he had left he had shut the window and turned on the air conditioning. She stretched and yawned and replayed the previous night in her mind.

She felt as if she had lost her virginity for the second time. She had no illusions about it being the beginning of some great love affair. It was more like being worked over by a professional. The idea made her smile. It hadn’t happened nearly enough in her life.

She rolled over. Suddenly she realized he had not gone back to his room. He was sitting in the chair beside the bed, fully dressed, staring at her.

‘Michel?’

‘Good morning.’

‘Oh my God ...’ He had a gun and it was pointed at her face. ‘What are you doing?’

‘Be good, Noelle. Don't make any noise and you won't get hurt.’

Now she understood why he had insisted on undressing in the dark. He did not want her to see the pistol.

‘What do you want?’

Michel smiled. ‘What I want is for you to do exactly what I tell you. I will not hesitate to use this if you don’t.’

Noelle looked into the fathomless, unmatched eyes. She believed him.

CHAPTER 23

The Jaipur Emporium was one of the finest jewelry stores in Delhi. The management of the Ashoka Hotel leased the dozen or so shops in its arcade to only carefully selected merchants for the convenience of the customers. The Jaipur Emporium was one of those chosen. It was owned by a Mister Ramesh Patel.

That morning, at a little after ten o'clock, he received a phone call from one of the guests. ‘Jaipur Emporium. How may I help you, please?’

‘This is Madame Giresse. Room 289. I am interested in buying some jewelry from you.’

‘Certainly, Madam. Here in the Emporium we have the finest selection of—’

‘No, I am sorry. I can't leave my room. I am unwell.’

‘Unwell?’

‘Something I've eaten. I can't leave my suite.’

‘That is most unfortunate.’

‘Yes, it is. So you'll have to come to me.’

‘Of course.’

‘I don't expect to see anything of inferior quality.’

Patel bridled. Who did these people think they were? ‘Certainly, Madam. I shall send someone up to your room presently.’

‘Immediately.’

‘Of course.’

‘Room 289.’

‘Yes, Madam. I am sure you will be most satisfied.’

He put down the phone and turned to one of his assistants. ‘Sanji, put these three trays in a case and take them to room 289. A Madame Giresse.’

Sanji nodded and did as he was told. He turned to go.

‘Oh, and Sanji … don't haggle. If she thinks she's Queen of Bloody India she can pay top price. All right?’

♦ ♦ ♦

Noelle's hands were shaking so badly she was unable to replace the phone on its cradle. Michel had to do it for her.

‘Bravo,’ he whispered. ‘A fine performance.’

Noelle felt the warm metal of the gun barrel pressed against her neck. ‘Please don't hurt me,’ she said.

‘There is no need for anyone to get hurt as long as you do what I say.’

‘What are you going to do?’

‘Don’t worry about me. Just make sure you play your part, like I tell you. Now you must get dressed. Get up.’

Noelle could barely stand up; her knees were shaking. She had never known been as terrified as she was now. She couldn’t think, and her throat was so tight she could barely speak.

‘I want you to find your best dress and put it on.’

‘Please Michel, I—’

‘Do it!’

He grabbed a handful of dresses and threw them on the bed. Then he grabbed her by the arm and shoved her towards them. ‘You're hurting me!’

‘Choose a dress. Put it on. Here, that one.’

‘But it's an evening gown.’

‘Do it.’

She slipped the dressing gown off her shoulders and let it fall to the floor. She fumbled in the drawers for her underwear. He watched her dispassionately, the pistol in his right hand. Suddenly he laughed.

‘What is it?’

‘You're blushing like a virgin.’

‘Don't look at me.’

‘If I don't look at you, you will scream and run for the door.’

She slipped into her pants, fumbled with the strap of her brassiere. It was as if the previous night had never happened. She wondered what sort of man could make love to a woman and then casually humiliate her like this. It was a nightmare.

He was still staring at her.

‘You are very beautiful,’ he said.

‘Please let me go.’

‘Not yet.’ He picked up the evening gown from the bed and threw it to her. ‘Put it on.’

She did as he said.

Michel removed the emerald-cut ruby from the little finger of his left hand and threw it to her. ‘Here, put it on.’

‘Why?’

‘It's a working prop to impress our friends downstairs.’

‘I don't understand.’

‘You don’t have to. But if you perform your next role as well as your first, then perhaps I shall let you keep it. Now, put on a pair of shoes. You look a mess. You’d better go in the bathroom and try and do something with yourself. You can’t answer the door looking like that.’ She pushed open the bathroom door but before she could close it he followed her inside.

‘But I need to pee.’

‘Then I’ll watch. But hurry up. You need to fix your hair and get some make-up on before our friend arrives.’

♦ ♦ ♦

Sanji bowed, his shiny brown head bobbing on his shoulders. ‘Good morning, Madam. I am from the Jaipur Emporium.’

Noelle looked him up and down as if he were inferior goods, just as Michel had told her to do. As if he's something you just found on the sole of your shoe. ‘You have to be arrogant. Otherwise they’ll think you don’t have any money.’

‘Come in,’ Noelle said. She wondered if there was some way she could warn the man of what was about to happen. She knew Michel was watching through a crack in the bathroom door, the Beretta trained on the back of her head.

‘Mr. Patel sends his apologies. I am Sanji Viswanath.’

Michel had warned her this might happen. She turned and walked imperiously back into the room. Sanji followed, carrying the rosewood case with the three trays of gems Patel had selected.

Noelle sat down in the armchair facing the bathroom door, just as Michel had instructed her. From there she could see the black eye of the silenced pistol pointing at her heart.

‘Sit down,’ Noelle said to Viswanath. She indicated the other chair.

‘Thank you, Madam.’ If was wondering why the blinds were drawn and the room in semi-darkness, he did not show it. He placed the rosewood case on the coffee table between them and unlocked it. ‘I think you will agree that what I have here are some of the finest creations in Delhi.’

Noelle reached into the case and took out a diamond ring. She rolled it between her thumb and forefinger under the light of the table lamp.

Sanji leaned eagerly forward. ‘A most exquisite piece,’ he said.

Noelle dropped it back into the tray with studied indifference. She looked into the salesman’s face. She wanted to scream at him: For God's sake, don't you realize what's going on? Are you blind? Look at me, see how my hands are shaking! Do you think this is because of something I’ve eaten?

Sanji frowned. ‘Is something wrong?’

Noelle glanced quickly towards the bathroom. ‘I feel a little unwell, that's all. What else do you have to show me?’

Sanji picked up an emerald necklace and held it out. ‘This is a most exquisite piece. Surely one of the finest necklaces in all Asia.’

Noelle took it from him. She knew nothing about jewelry, but Michel had told her that didn’t matter. Their first jewels will be mediocre at best. When you throw them back in their face they will respect you and then they will then open the safe for you.

Noelle dropped it carelessly into its bed of green velvet. She leaned back in her chair and toyed with the ruby on her finger. ‘Surely you don't think I'd be interested in these trinkets?’

Sanji looked at the ring. He looked impressed. ‘But, Madam, I—’

‘Please tell your employer that I am most disappointed.’

‘I assure you, Madam, I …’

Noelle looked away, into the ugly mouth of the silencer barrel. Death, just a few meters away. Was there a way out? Could she warn this man about what was happening without Michel being aware of it? She could feel Michel watching her from the bathroom, and decided she dare not risk it.

‘Madam?’

‘Tell Mr. Patel if he cannot do better than this, then I shall take my business elsewhere.’ She dropped a platinum American Express card on the table. Michel had given it to her. She wondered how he had come by it and shuddered. ‘My husband gave me his credit card,’ she said.

Sanji licked his lips. ‘We do have some pieces downstairs that we reserve for our most discerning clients. If you will permit me to return to the shop ...’

Noelle waved a hand dismissively. ‘Yes, yes. Go ahead.’ She felt suddenly light-headed. This was what Michel had told her he would do.

Sanji closed his case, bowed, and went to the door. Noelle heard it shut gently behind him. She put her face in her hands and burst into tears.

♦ ♦ ♦

Sanji brought the case back into the office and put it on the desk. Patel unlocked it and counted the pieces. ‘She didn’t buy anything?’

‘Mr. Patel, sir, she says she does not like anything in here.’

‘Why?’

‘She said they were not what she had expected.’

‘What was she expecting?’

‘Something a little more … exclusive.’ Patel raised his eyebrows. Perhaps he had misjudged the Frenchwoman. He was prepared to revise his estimate of anyone who wished to make him richer. ‘She told me she was too ill to come downstairs.’

‘The blinds are drawn, and she is very pale and she shivers, as if she has a fever.’

‘But you think she has means?’

‘She has a platinum credit card. And she was wearing a ring, a Burmese ruby, emerald-cut on white gold. Most expensive.’

‘Very well. We shall see if we can accommodate her. Mind the shop for me. I shall attend to Madame Giresse.’ Sanji went out to serve a customer. Patel went to the safe in the corner and unlocked it.

♦ ♦ ♦

Michel lit a cigarette. He had the pistol cradled in his lap. ‘You would have made a wonderful actress,’ he said.

Noelle put her face in her hands. She wondered how she could have once found this man so attractive. ‘What now?’

‘Now we wait for Mr. Patel.’

‘Why do you need me for this?’

‘This way the shop assistant does not see me.’

‘But surely …’ She stopped. It was suddenly obvious to her. Whatever happened, he was going to kill her. She was the only way anyone could link him to the crime.

‘If you do what I say, nothing will happen to you. Perhaps you could come with me.’

‘Come with you?’

‘You could be my partner.’

She knew that was a lie. She looked up into his eyes. There was nothing there, nothing but cunning. How easily we are all swayed by charm, she thought. Because someone is funny or attractive or sophisticated we assume they are good people, when the truth is that the devil always smiles, and he always sweeps you off your feet. It’s the best disguise there is.

‘Please let me go,’ she said.

‘Of course. Once I have what I want.’

‘I can't ... I can't take this ...’ Her eyes rolled back in her head. She started to pitch forwards onto the carpet.

‘Shit,’ Michel said.

Instinctively, he put the gun down and reached out to catch her. But Noelle did not faint. Instead she pushed him away and picked up the gun. She twisted around on her knees, aimed the pistol, and pulled the trigger.

♦ ♦ ♦

Patel stood outside room 289. He cleared his throat and straightened his tie. He knocked twice on the door.

A man opened the door. Patel frowned.

‘I'm sorry. I was looking for a Madame Giresse.’

‘I am her husband. Come in.’ He stepped aside.

Patel wondered why Sanji had not told him about a husband. He hesitated. The room was in semi-darkness, as Sanji had said. He could see Madame Giresse sitting in an armchair, facing away from him. She twisted around. She had a gag in her mouth. Her hands were tied behind her back and her feet were tied to the legs of the chair with pieces of torn bed sheet. There was blood in her hair.

Before he had time to react Michel had grabbed him by the collar and hauled him into the room. The door slammed shut behind him and he saw the man swing something at his head. His legs gave way beneath him and the world went black.

♦ ♦ ♦

Michel dragged Patel into the bathroom. A few moments later he came out, wiping his hands on a towel. Noelle's eyes followed him around the room. She could only see out of one eye; the other was blinded by the sticky blood still weeping from the gash on her forehead where Michel had hit her with the ashtray.

He bent down and picked up Patel's rosewood case. He unlocked it and took out one of the pieces, a jade brooch in the shape of an elephant with a sunburst of rubies. 'Look, Noelle. It could have been yours.' He pulled up a chair and sat down beside her. 'You wanted to kill me, Noelle. I offered you riches and in return you tried to trick me. You women are all the same. You give a man love and then you try and destroy him.'

He reached out a hand to caress her neck. Noelle braced her feet on the floor and tried to throw the chair backwards. Michel held the chair with one hand while his fingers tightened around her throat. 'No one had ever loved you like I loved you, had they Noelle? I gave you the best night of your life. All I asked was a little help in return. Instead you almost killed me. You nearly spoiled everything. What should I do with you?'

Noelle was making small mewing noises through the gag. Michel watched her, his face ugly with disgust.

Women.

You couldn't trust any of them.

CHAPTER 24

Montmartre, Paris

‘All right, Valentine, over here, walk towards me. Swing your skirt, that's it. That's it.’

Click-whirr.

‘Now over by the wall. Look away, look away. Beautiful.’

Click-whirr.

Armand Poleski was excited. Occasionally he knew the photographs he was taking were special, even before he developed them. This was one of those times. There was gooseflesh on his skin, but it was not the chill of the afternoon making him shiver.

Yes, these were very good.

In the background, a group of old men sat at one of the tables, *Gauloises* clamped between their teeth and watched, laughing among themselves. The white-jacketed proprietor sat at one of his own tables, his eyes riveted on Valentine's legs.

That would make a great shot, Armand thought, bringing the man's face completely into frame.

Click-whirr.

‘Danielle, Isabella, over here.’ The other two models had changed into their dresses; a Dior midriff top and black three-tiered skirt, and a Givenchy cotton jersey dress. They clambered out of the van and a dresser threw their fur coats over their shoulders. ‘Over here by the wall.’

The sun appeared for a moment between banks of grey-flecked cumulus, glistened on the dome of the Sacré-Coeur Basilica on the Montmartre.

‘Danielle, take your coat off.’

‘It's practically snowing,’ the girl whined.

‘Look, *chèrie*, this is the spring collection. Take the coat off.’

‘I'll freeze my tits off.’

‘If they fall off, I'll be the first to grab them. Now take the fucking coat off, there's a good girl.’

The girl pouted but did as she was told. Some young men wandered across the street to watch. They whistled and applauded.

Armand snapped a new roll of film into the camera. ‘Okay, now look sexy.’

‘How can I look sexy in this fucking weather?’

Armand winced. The girl was gorgeous until she opened her mouth. Her thick Breton accent grated on his nerves. Unlike Valentine. Now there was some class.

‘Sit down at the table. Okay, good. Now look at me. No, not like that, you silly bitch. Look sexy, for Christ's sake. Think about the last great screw you had.’

‘Well, it wasn't you, mon petit chou.’

‘Think about screwing Alain Delon then.’

‘I'd rather screw Warren Beatty.’

‘Think about him, then.’

‘How can I think about sex when I've got icicles in my pussy?’

Petite Conner! The girl was supposed to be a professional! He wondered, as he had wondered countless times before, about the wisdom of screwing your own models. It made them unmanageable. ‘Isabella, come here ...’

As he turned around to look for the other girl he saw that Valentine had wandered across the street and was watching a street entertainer who had braved the chill of the afternoon. Armand put his hands on his hips. Jesus, where did the agencies get these models from? ‘Valentine!’

A small crowd had gathered around the man. He was a fire-eater and they all moved back to give him room. Armand realized the possibilities. He reached for his camera and ran across the street, ignoring the curses of a Citroën driver who had to swerve to avoid him.

Valentine slipped naturally into a pose for him, her hands on her hips, her lips parted, eyes wide. Behind her the fire-eater spewed a mushroom of flame into the air.

Click-whirr.

Armand crouched down for a better angle. Fantastic.

‘Put your hands in your hair, toss your head back. That's it, that's it.’ He shot frame after frame.

Click-whirr. Click-whirr.

Valentine thrust a hand down her thigh, put her other hand behind her head. The girl was a natural.

Click-whirr.

The street entertainer ran over. He had been cheated by photographers before. He held out his hand, demanding money. Armand scrabbled in his jeans pocket, threw a handful of notes on the pavement without counting them. '*Dêpèchez-vous!*' he shouted at him. 'Hurry up!'

The busker took another mouthful of the liquid and threw back his head, the bottle outstretched in his left hand, the lighted torch in the other. Another jet of flame.

Armand kept framing shot after shot until the roll was gone. This girl was wonderful. He wondered how he might get her into bed without causing a big scene with Danielle.

'Beautiful,' he grinned. '*Magnifique!*'

♦ ♦ ♦

Armand Poleski stood in the darkroom of his Montmartre studio and stared at the glossy prints drying like laundry over the chemical trays. 'Unbelievable,' he murmured.

He held one of the still-wet prints under an infra-red light. The editor will love these, he thought. Valentine's scarlet scalloped dress and the billowing flames shooting from the mouth of the street performer were in dramatic counterpoint to the drab faces of the spectators and the grey sky. The fireball lent a devilish tinge to the faces of the men watching from the café tables. Valentine, though, appeared angelic; pale and shocked.

Armand smiled. There were still primitives in the world who believed you could capture the soul in a photograph. Maybe they are right, he thought. Sometimes you really can extract the essence of the psyche through the camera lens.

The girl was still a novice, but he recognized raw talent when he saw it. There was something about her that went beyond artifice. He was convinced that Vogue would feature the photograph on its front cover. She would soon be in big demand. It was a shame she wouldn't go to bed with him. He could have taught her a thing or two.

He went out and padded through the soft-lit apartment to the phone. He had a long-standing arrangement with a New York modeling agency to

spy out exceptional talent. He got a reasonable retainer and a handsome commission when he found a girl they could use.

As he waited for the long-distance connection, he stared at the photograph in his hand. Extraordinary.

♦ ♦ ♦

The party was in the St Germain apartment of a Cosmopolitan fashion editor. When Armand and Valentine arrived, just after nine, the room was buzzing. The crowd was all magazine and fashion people; editors, agents, designers, photographers and models.

Armand introduced Valentine to a young and upcoming designer, a thin young man in a skin-tight shirt. He left her there to work the crowd. Valentine resented him deserting her so soon.

The designer made desultory conversation while he eyed a tall blond-haired man on the other side of the room. They both looked for an excuse to escape.

Valentine hated fashion parties, hated the cheap talk and the thick undercurrents of envy and muted rage. She would not have come but Armand had insisted.

I must get out of here, she thought. This was a mistake.

But then Armand reappeared. ‘Valentine,’ he said. ‘There's someone I'd like you to meet.’

There was a tall, elegantly dressed man in a navy blue double-breasted suit beside him. ‘This is John Cassavettes,’ Armand was saying. ‘John, this is the girl I told you about. Valentine Breton.’

‘*Enchanté,*’ he said. He held out his hand.

Valentine had heard of him. He had built up Fashion Incorporated, his modeling agency, from nothing to the second biggest agency in New York in just six years.

‘Armand was right. You are exceptionally beautiful,’ he said.

‘Thank you,’ Valentine said. She heard it all the time. It didn’t mean anything. Being beautiful was like wearing a beautiful dress. When you wore it out, people wouldn’t notice you anymore. It wasn’t you they were looking at, it was the label.

‘Armand tells me I should see your 'folio. He also tells me that Vogue are making you their cover girl next month. I am always looking for young

women with talent.’

‘That's very kind of him to mention me. I'm very flattered. But I don't think I'd be interested.’

‘No?’

‘It's not that I wouldn't love to work for you. I just don't want to leave Paris.’

‘How much do you earn here in France?’

‘I’m sure I could earn far more in America. But I don't—’

‘My girls are the best in the world, Valentine. Their faces are on the front covers of Vogue and Cosmopolitan, too. The American editions. They can earn a thousand dollars a day. Can you afford to say no to that?’

‘There are some things in life that are more important than money, *Monsieur* Cassavettes.’

He looked at Armand in mock astonishment. ‘Really?’

‘Thank you for the offer. Thank you too, Armand.’

Cassavettes shrugged and gave her his card. ‘If you ever change your mind.’ He kissed her hand and moved away.

Armand shook his head. ‘You must be crazy, Valentine.’

‘Perhaps.’

‘Most girls would give their right arms for the offer you just turned down.’

‘They wouldn't make very good models with one arm. Anyway, it wasn't an offer. He just wanted to see my 'folio.’

‘He's seen it. He was being polite.’

Valentine touched his hand. ‘I don't know how you did it, but thanks anyway.’

‘Don't thank me. You just cost me a big commission.’ He emptied his champagne glass and grabbed another from a passing tray. ‘Out of interest, why did you say no? If you’re not interested in the money, what is it you want?’

‘I just want to be happy, like everyone. Look, I have to go. I'm not in a party mood.’ Her lips brushed his cheek and then she was gone, drifting away through the crowd, leaving him staring after her, bewildered.

Tehran

A tall, good-looking young man with an Asian complexion and startling bleached hair browsed the news stand at the international terminal, as he waited for his connecting flight to Singapore. He picked up a magazine and stared at the cover.

‘Adrienne,’ he said.

Moving like a man in a trance, he paid for the magazine and folded it into his briefcase. Then he ran to the nearest phone and placed a long-distance call to Serge Renard in Paris.

CHAPTER 25

Paris

The 747 thundered down the runway at Orly airport. The engines roared as the reverse thrust brought the massive machine to a halt. At last he had found her. He had rehearsed the scene so many times in his mind; sometimes the fantasy ended in a tearful reunion; sometimes it ended in violence. He had imagined anger, recrimination, sorrow, relief, joy and death. He wondered which it would be.

♦ ♦ ♦

Paris in the Springtime; it's not like the songs, Renard thought as he wiped the condensation from his office window and looked down into the street. Grey sheets of rain and the traffic snarled right along the boulevards. He watched a man struggle with a broken umbrella in the wind.

He heard Monique, his receptionist, walk in. She was early. ‘You didn’t bring any good weather with you,’ he said.

‘I didn't come here to discuss the weather.’ Michel opened his leather attaché case and took out a copy of Vogue. He threw it on the table. ‘This is her.’

Renard gaped at him. ‘How did you get in?’

‘The door was open.’

‘You gave me a shock.’

‘You should do something about your security in this place. You’re supposed to be a detective.’

‘Most of my clients make an appointment.’

‘I’m paying you. I’ll see you when I want.’ He pointed to the front cover of the magazine. ‘I found her myself in the end. I think I wasted my money.’

Renard picked up the magazine. ‘But this girl is so young. The woman we are looking for is in her forties.’

‘That is her,’ Michel said, stabbing the glossy cover portrait. ‘Find her. Find out who she is.’ He snapped the briefcase shut and went to the door. ‘I

give you three days.’

The door shut behind him.

♦ ♦ ♦

‘You were right,’ Renard said. He took a manila folder out of his drawer. ‘Her name is Valentine Breton. Her mother's name is Adrienne, maiden name … Christian. Amazing.’ He slid the folder across the desk. ‘It’s all there. Her name, address, recent family history.’

Michel flicked through the report. ‘Breton. Rue St Luc. Jesus Christ, that's only a few blocks from here!’

‘I couldn't have known that. I'm a private investigator, not a psychic.’ He lit a cigarette. ‘Do you mind telling me what this is all about now?’

‘If you were any detective at all, you’d be able to find out for yourself.’

Arrogant prick, Renard thought. Let’s see how you like this next bit of news then. ‘I'm afraid it's all a little irrelevant now anyway,’ he said.

‘What do you mean?’

‘Look at the final notation.’

Michel turned to the last page and read it. The folder slipped from his fingers and its contents scattered on the floor.

‘They buried her next to her father in the Père Lachaise.’

Michel shook his head. ‘It must be a mistake.’

‘I don't make mistakes.’

‘She can't be dead!’

‘We all die. *Desolé m’sieur.* I did my best. You asked me to find her for you. I have found her.’

Renard was unprepared for what happened next. Michel leaped to his feet, grabbed him by the collar and pushed him backwards off the chair. Renard suddenly found himself flat on his back, the knuckles of Michel's left hand at his throat, his knee on his chest. Michel grabbed a handful of his hair. ‘You jerked me around all this time and she was practically living in your back garden!’ Renard didn't see where the knife came from. Suddenly it was just there in his hand, the point inches from his eyes. Renard tried to scream but Michel's knuckles choked him. He closed his eyes and prayed.

If I move now, I'm dead meat. This bastard's mad.

Just when he thought he was going to pass out Michel stood up. Renard lay there, gasping for breath. Michel stood over him, the handsome face screwed into a terrible monkey grimace. ‘Fucking dead! Four fucking years and now you tell me she's dead!’ With one quick movement he swept his arm across Renard’s desk, sweeping everything on to the floor. A glass ashtray splintered against the filing cabinet. ‘Fucking dead!’

Michel picked up Renard's chair and threw it across the room. It smashed into the door, and one of the legs splintered off.

There was a scream. Monique stood in the doorway, staring wide-eyed at the scene. Renard waved her away. She screamed again as Michel ripped the telephone out of the wall and threw it at her head.

The Michel sank to his haunches. He put his head in his hands and began to sob like a little child.

Renard got slowly back to his feet, straightened his tie, and walked out of his office into reception. Monique was on the telephone.

‘What are you doing?’ he snapped.

‘I'm phoning the police.’

He slammed his fist on the cradle. ‘Don't be stupid. I don't want the fucking *flics* nosing around here! Just make a cup of coffee. Strong and black. He’s upset, that’s all. Besides, he still owes me the balance of my fee.’

♦ ♦ ♦

The gentle slap of the wipers swept away the mist of rain on the windscreen. Michel turned the heater in the rented Mercedes to maximum. He could never remember feeling this cold in his whole life.

He could not believe his mother had abandoned him again. He had never believed he would not see her again. Why did she do this? There was no way to mend the past now. Everything was incomplete. The scars could not heal.

He parked the car and got out, feeling the rain sting his face. There was an imposing square gate in a high white wall and a clutch of tourists. He couldn’t believe anyone would want to go sightseeing on a day like this.

He stumbled blindly along the cobbled paths, past weathered angels, dank vaults, skeletal trees. A woman was taking a photograph of Emmanuel Proust’s grave. He passed a mossy tomb that bore a plaque saying: Regrets.

It was vast sprawling metropolis of the dead. He would never find her in here without a map and already the afternoon was fading to grey.

He went back to the car and took out the file Renard had given him. He had misjudged him; he was thorough. He had marked the grave number and its location on the last page.

It was almost dark when he found her. The grave was unremarkable, but had served many generations of her husband's family. Her name had been the last one added, and there were fresh flowers in the vase.

ADRIENNE BRETON
1928-71
A wonderful mother and an adoring wife.
We will always miss you.
God will keep you a place with the angels.

Michel stared at it for a long time. Then he threw back his head and laughed.

'A place with the angels!'

He turned his face to the heavens allowing the rain to sting his cheeks. He could never be free of her now. Not until the day he died.

CHAPTER 26

Michel parked in the street.

The apartment was in a turn-of-the-century building near the Rue Amali between the Boulevard des Invalides and the Eiffel Tower. There was a charcuterie on one side, and an antique dealer on the other.

Michel flicked on the cabin light and checked Renard's folder. The Breton apartment was on the sixth floor.

It grew cold inside the car. Michel shivered. The rain angled down, illuminated by the sodium lights of the street lamps, driven by a north wind.

He looked down at the folder.

Subject had one daughter, Valentine Michelle, born 23/7/52. No other known offspring.

He closed the folder and turned off the cabin light.

He looked at his watch. The dial glowed in the gathering dusk. After six. Well, it didn’t matter. He would wait all night if he had to.

♦ ♦ ♦

An hour later he heard footsteps in the street, the sharp click-click of a woman's heels. It brought back a memory of his mother’s footsteps on a wooden staircase, a long time ago.

She passed within a few feet of the car and hurried across the street into the apartment building. She paused on the steps for just for a moment to shake the rain off her umbrella. She was mostly in shadow, but he knew it was her. It was the way she walked; just like her mother.

Their mother.

Then she disappeared inside the foyer.

Adrienne was not dead, after all. There was a part of her living on.

This was not over.

It was just beginning.

♦ ♦ ♦

‘*Bon soir, Papa!*’ Valentine threw off her coat and scarf and hung them on the back of the door. She hurried over to the fire. ‘*Fait froid!*

Jean-Claude was huddled in an armchair by the fire. He was wearing the same dressing gown he had had on when she had left that morning. He looked sunken and withered. He had aged twenty years since her mother died.

Valentine sat on the arm of the chair and put an arm around him. ‘How was your day?’

‘I feel so tired. I read a little this afternoon.’

‘We should go away for a while. A holiday. We can visit Uncle at Nîmes.’

‘Maybe soon. I don’t feel up to it just now.’

‘You need to get out of this apartment. You can't just sit here every day like this.’

‘I'm all right.’

‘We're going, and that's final! I’ll write to him tonight and organize everything.’ She kissed the top of his head. ‘I’ll make us dinner.’

He watched her walk into the kitchen. She reminded him so much of her mother at that age. Thank God she wasn’t like her in other ways. Where Adrienne had been cruel, Valentine was kind; where Adrienne had punished, Valentine forgave.

She was the reason he never regretted that miserable marriage.

But she couldn’t stay here forever. She was famous now, and he saw the way men looked at her in the street. Soon she would be gone. Some man would take her away.

He just prayed that it was the right man.

And not yet.

Please, not yet.

♦ ♦ ♦

Valentine left for work at seven minutes past eight the next morning. She walked two blocks to the metro at Gare des Invalides. She got off at L'Opéra and went into a building on the Rue de la Paix.

Michel followed her the whole way. There was a directory on the wall inside the foyer. The second and third floors belonged to the Elite modeling agency.

He studied the board for a long time, then turned and walked back to the Métro.

♦ ♦ ♦

It was that grey time of evening that Parisians call ‘*l'heure bleu.*’

A metallic voice from the tannoy announced the incoming train.

Valentine felt a cold draught of air from the black mouth of the tunnel and the platform shuddered beneath her feet like the first shock of an earthquake.

‘*Excusez-moi, Mademoiselle.* Do you have a light?’

Valentine turned around. She blinked; the man was striking to look at. He had bleached blond hair that jarred with his Asian complexion his deep brown eyes were direct and unsettling. They didn’t quite match.

‘*M’sieur?*’

‘A light?’

‘I'm sorry. I don't smoke. I've given up.’

‘Never mind. Thank you.’

The train thundered into the station, the brakes squealing so loud it set her teeth on edge. She ducked her head against the icy blast of air pushed in front of it. The doors opened, and the crowd surged out of the carriages, jostling her. When she got into the carriage she looked behind her to see if the man was still there, but he had disappeared.

When she reached Gare des Invalides half an hour later she was still thinking about him. It had been a very half-hearted attempt at a pass, if that was what it was. She put her hands deeper into her coat and walked a little faster. It had rained again, and the road gleamed in the dusk like the skin of a snake. Tires hissed on the wet bitumen. She turned off the Rue Amali, her head bowed beneath her umbrella against the driving rain.

Once she thought she heard footsteps running behind her, and she turned around, alarmed. But the street was empty.

That stranger on the platform. What was it about him that had seemed so … familiar? Perhaps it was simply his looks that had startled her. She hurried on, almost breaking into a run when she saw her apartment.

Just as she got inside the door, it started to rain. She stood in the foyer and looked back up the street. Was that the man from the Métro? No, just

her imagination. There was no one there. She pressed the call button for the lift and forgot all about it.

There was cigarette ash spilled over the desk. Budjinski scowled at the mess, as if someone else had made it. He emptied the ashtray into his waste basket and lit another *Gauloise*.

He had recovered the telex from Records an hour ago. He picked it up and read it again.

28/12/71
TO: IP PARIS
WE WISH TO INFORM YOU OF A ROBBERY REPORTED ON 28/12/71 A T MANDARIN HOTEL STOP ROBBERY PERPETRATED BY PERSON OR PERSONS UNKNOWN STOP OWNER OF ARCADE JEWELRY STORE LURED TO ROOM AND KNOCKED UNCONSCIOUS STOP OCCUPIER OF ROOM MURDERED STOP NOW POSITIVELY IDENTIFIED AS AMERICAN TOURIST SUSAN CONNORS OF HOUSTON TEXAS STOP
WE STILL WISH TO QUESTION A MAN SUSPECTED OF INVOLVEMENT IN THIS CRIME STOP PROBABLE FOREIGN NATIONAL 20-25 YEARS OF LATIN DESCENT SIX FOOT DARK HAIR USES THE NAME ALAN REGAN STOP
REQUEST URGENT ASSISTANCE IN LOCATING THIS PERSON STOP IF DETAINED EXTRADITION WILL BE REQUESTED STOP
END IP SINGAPORE
SIGNED: ROLAND TAN (CHIEF SUPERINTENDENT)
SINGAPORE POLICE (INTERPOL DIVISION)

He stared out of his window towards the Longchamps Racecourse. It was a race day, and from where he sat he could make out the grandstand and the distant flash of colored silk as the riders trotted out onto the track.

But his eyes were turned inward, on places very far away from St. Cloud. He thought about it; a man uses a woman to help him rob a jewelry store; first Singapore, then New Delhi.

Was it this same: ‘Alan Regan’?

It had to be.

Were there other similar unsolved crimes gathering dust in police filing cabinets around the world? He could soon find out. He pulled a notepad towards him, lit yet another cigarette, and set to work.

♦ ♦ ♦

The radio room on the top floor of the Interpol headquarters was never silent. Double glass partitioning muted the endless metallic clatter of the Telex, Teletype and radio telegraph machines. Many of the thousands of messages received each day still arrived in Morse code because the poorer member countries of the organization could not afford more expensive equipment.

In another room, four highly trained operators relayed the five letter combinations that comprised the Interpol code, transmitting in English, Spanish, French or Arabic.

A thin, pale man wearing thick glasses sat down in front of a short-wave radio and placed his index finger over the Morse code key. His hand moved steadily, in an easy rolling motion, tapping out an average of 35 words a minute.

The words were relayed from one of the antennae on the roof above, and from there to a pasture outside the village of St Martin d'Abbat, eighty kilometers to the south. From there, a giant transmitter flashed Budjinksi’s alert to police forces right around the world, from Switzerland to the Philippines.

All he had to do now was wait.

CHAPTER 27

A bright, clear day. Perhaps spring is here at last, Valentine thought. A cool breeze set the *contraventions* fluttering under the windscreen wipers of cars, set the flaps of the bright café umbrellas fluttering all along the boulevard.

Valentine warmed herself in the tepid noonday sun and ordered *café au lait* and a *croque monsieur*. A group of laughing teenagers roared up to the sidewalk on mopeds.

The waiter brought her lunch. She ate slowly, watching a busker with a flute trying to charm some centimes from the passing tourists. She had just finished her coffee when something made her turn around and she saw him sitting behind her, just two tables away.

It was the man from the Métro. He looked up and smiled.

He folded the newspaper he was reading and came over. ‘May I sit down?’ he said, and did not wait for her to answer.

‘Do I know you, *monsieur*?’ Valentine said.

‘I thought I recognized you from somewhere. Perhaps I am mistaken.’

‘I think you are.’

‘Didn’t we speak briefly the other night, while you were waiting for your train. I needed a light for my cigarette.’

‘I'm sorry, *monsieur*, I do not remember.’

‘Please stop calling me '*monsieur*'. My name is Michel. What's yours?’

‘You are very direct, *monsieur*.’

He grinned. ‘Yes, I am but I’m afraid I am also very clumsy. You will have to forgive me.

Clumsy like a fox, Valentine thought. ‘My name is Valentine.’

‘That’s a beautiful name.’

‘Thank you.’

‘Do you work near here?’

Valentine thought about getting up and walking away. She wouldn’t often let herself get picked up like this. She studied him; an extraordinary looking man. His clothes were expensive and so was his wristwatch. He wore tinted Bronzini sunglasses, and the ring on his little finger was inlaid with a huge emerald-cut ruby. ‘I work in the fashion business.’

‘Do you enjoy it?’

‘Yes. Why?’

‘A girl like you deserves the best life can offer.’

‘I am quite content with my life, thank you, *monsieur*.’

He sat back in his chair, smiling at her. He looked completely relaxed. His demeanor was at once offensive and compelling. It left her feeling a little off balance, like his eyes.

‘And what do you do, *monsieur*, when you are not trying to pick up women shamelessly in cafés?’

‘I’m a tourist.’

‘And when you are not being a tourist?’

‘I travel.’

‘You're being very mysterious.’

‘That is because the truth is so mundane.’ He leaned towards her. ‘You know, you are a very beautiful woman.’

Valentine looked at her watch. She had an assignment at a photographic studio at two o'clock. ‘You’ll have to be a little more original than that.’ She got up to go. ‘Au revoir, *m’sieur*.’

The next day at the agency there were two dozen red roses waiting for her at the front desk. Valentine tore open the card, feeling the receptionist's eyes burning the back of her neck.

‘To a beautiful lady. From *M’sieur*. Sorry I couldn’t be more original.’ She turned back to the girl at the desk. ‘Did he bring these himself?’

‘Yesterday afternoon. He was very charming.’

Valentine read the card a second time. Who did this man think he was, sending flowers to a woman he had just met casually on the street?

‘No one ever sent me long-stemmed roses,’ the receptionist said.

‘You have them, then,’ Valentine said, and walked away. Damn him! He expected her to fall at his feet because he was rich. She met hundreds of men like that every day in this business.

♦ ♦ ♦

‘Valentine, over here, walk towards me. Swing your skirt, that's it. That's it.’ Click-whirr. ‘Stand in front of the painter there. Look away, look away. Beautiful.’

The weather had turned, and the late afternoon was unseasonably warm. The assignment was for Cosmo, a new summer collection by Patou,

and Armand's idea had been to take the shots among the riotous color of the painters and tourists on the Left Bank, with the Notre-Dame and the Île de la Cité in the background.

‘Put your hands in your hair. Toss your head back. That's it, that's it.’

Valentine looked beyond the camera and froze. It was him. A black Mercedes was double-parked against the curb and Michel was sitting on the bonnet, grinning.

He waved.

‘What's the matter?’ Armand said. ‘Valentine!’

‘Sorry, Armand.’

‘What's the matter? What are you looking at?’

‘Nothing.’

Armand turned around. ‘Who's that?’

‘An acquaintance.’

‘Uh-huh. Well get that mooncalf look out of your eyes. We've got work to do.’

Valentine tried to concentrate. But she felt suddenly awkward and self-conscious. She could feel him watching her, damn him.

When they took a break he sauntered over. ‘Hello, Valentine.’

The make-up girl was fussing around her, adding a little more blush. ‘Hello, *m’sieur,*’ she said coolly. ‘Thank you for the flowers.’

Michel indicated the car. ‘Our limousine. I rented it at great expense so I could take you to lunch after you’ve finished the shoot.’

‘How did you know where to find me?’

‘The girl at the agency. The one at reception. She won't get into trouble, will she?’ His eyes glittered with amusement.

‘What did you say to her?’

‘I tortured her with hot irons. She was very brave. But when I told her she had lovely eyes she caved completely.’

I bet, Valentine thought. ‘She is not supposed to give out that sort of information.’

‘Are you angry with her? Or with me?’

She smiled, in spite of herself.

‘I’m furious with both of you.’

‘Then let me make it up to you. I have booked a table at the Tour d'Argent. Do you think you’ll be finished in around half an hour?’

‘Tour d'Argent? That’s very expensive. And I'm not dressed ...’ She had come to the shoot in jeans and a black t-shirt.

‘You could stop traffic in a potato sack and snowshoes.’

‘All right. Wait for me. I’ll be done soon. Have the potato sack ready. Are you sure the snowshoes are my size?’

♦ ♦ ♦

Michel came around the car and held the door open for her. Valentine got in. He took the *contravention* off the windscreen, screwed it up and threw it in the gutter.

He started the engine, then reached into the glove box and produced a small, velvet pouch. He emptied the contents into his palm. It was a diamond necklace and two pearl drop-earrings.

‘Here,’ he said, ‘these are for you.’

Valentine could not hide her astonishment. They would be worth tens of thousands of francs. ‘Are these . . . real?’ she stammered.

‘Of course.’

‘But ... I can't take these.’

‘Why not?’

‘I would think that's obvious.’

‘Call it a loan then.’ He gunned the Mercedes through a red light on the corner of the Rue St Antoine and the Boulevard de Sébastopol. ‘You can give them back to me afterwards.’

‘But...’

‘You can't go to the Tour d'Argent without jewelry. You might as well be naked.’

‘All right. But the moment lunch is over you're getting them back.’ She slipped on the heavy necklace. ‘Do you always carry this much jewelry in your car?’

‘It's my business.’

‘You're a gem dealer?’

‘Yes. I export them. From Asia mainly.’

‘Then where do you live?’

‘In hotels.’ They turned on to the Quai Tournelle. ‘We're nearly there. I'll tell you about it over lunch.’

The Tour d'Argent was one of the most famous restaurants in Paris. Michel had booked a seat by the window overlooking the Seine and the Île de la Cité.

‘You look stunning,’ Michel told her. ‘Practically every man in the room was staring at you as we walked in. Didn't you notice?’

She grinned. ‘There were a couple, I suppose.’

The sommelier brought a bottle of Moët et Chandon, crisp and very cold. ‘Thank you again for the flowers.’

‘It was my pleasure. I am a romantic.’

‘How did you find out where I worked?’

‘You told me.’

‘Did I?’

‘Of course.’

She studied him over the rim of her glass. ‘You speak French perfectly. But I can’t place your accent. And you don't look French. So who are you, *M’sieur* Michel?’

‘My mother was French, my father was … a little more exotic. They were unconventional people.’

‘And how long are you staying in Paris?’

‘Until I finish my business.’

‘And then you go home?’

‘There is no home. I told you, I live in hotels. My business takes me all over the world.’

‘You are lucky.’

‘It gets lonely sometimes. There are times when I wish there was someone to share my life with.’

‘Where is your family?’

‘I don’t have a family. I never really knew my father. And my mother ... my mother died when I was four years old.’

‘You never knew your father?’

‘He left us when I was quite young.’

‘That’s terrible. I can't imagine not having a family. Who brought you up?’

‘I grew up in an orphanage. In Saigon.’

His playfulness had evaporated, and she found herself revising her first impressions of him. She had thought he was just another spoiled playboy; this story of loss and deprivation served to make him even more fascinating.

‘That must have been … terrible.’ She realized how lame that must sound to him.

‘I survived. I’m still here.’

The waiter arrived with their entrées - *pâté de foie gras* - and the spell was broken. Michel's mood changed abruptly. He leaned across the table and refilled her glass. ‘Let's not talk about that now. Tell me all about you. I want to know where you grew up, what your family was like. Families fascinate me. I suppose it's because I never had one of my own.’

So Valentine told him about Dakar, about her childhood in the beautiful rambling white villa; about the shock of moving from a sixteen-bedroom mansion to a cramped two-bedroom apartment; about her father, and how he had been invalided out of the *Service Publique*.

When she had finished she found that lunch was over and she had drunk far too much champagne.

‘I'm sorry. You must be bored. All we've talked about is me.’

‘I’m not bored, I am fascinated. I want to know everything about you. Everything.’

‘It must all seem very …ordinary.’

‘Not at all. There is one thing though.’

‘What's that?’

‘You talked all that time, but you barely mentioned your mother.’

‘There's not much to tell.’

He shrugged. ‘All right. I'm just curious.’

‘Michel, I don’t talk about her much because … for as long as I can remember my mother was an alcoholic. We rarely spoke to each other. She died a few months ago in an asylum. She was both mentally and physically ill. I've shocked you, I'm sorry.’ She finished her champagne. ‘You should take me home now.’

The wine had gone to her head but she sobered up quickly when they reached the street. They walked back to the car in silence.

Michel opened the door for her. As she went to get in, he caught her arm. ‘Valentine.’ He pulled her towards him and kissed her on the mouth. She kissed him back with a passion that perhaps surprised them both.

♦ ♦ ♦

As they drove to his hotel Michel watched her from the corner of his eye. It was astonishing. She looked exactly as she had looked, the last time he had seen her.

He started to remember things he had tried so hard for so long to forget.

Adrienne combing her hair.

Saying: I have to go away for just a little while.

The whine of the mortar before it fell on the orphanage.

Thien taking off his belt: Now I will show you how we treat thieves here at Van Trang.

The chief head warden at the Port of Bombay prison: I shall make you curse your mothers for ever giving you birth.

And as he looked at her he felt the rage growing inside him again.

CHAPTER 28

Michel had a suite at the Bristol on the Rue du Faubourg St Honoré.

It was late afternoon and the lamps had been turned on in the bedroom, throwing his face into shadow. He stood by the window smoking a thin cheroot and watched her undress.

Valentine pulled her t-shirt over her head and kicked off her jeans. She was naked underneath except for a pair of sheer silk underpants. She slipped them off and crossed the room.

She took the cheroot out of his fingers and stubbed it out in the heavy onyx ashtray.

‘You must think you're very clever. Getting what you want so easily.’

‘I don't just want this. I want all of you.’

She put her hands around his neck, pulled his face towards her, crushing his mouth against hers. He picked her up and carried her to the bed.

He kissed her lips, her cheeks, her neck. Then he moved slowly down the length of her body, his tongue darting in delicate butterfly motions along her breasts, and her stomach. He made her come with his tongue, not once, but twice.

Then he knelt between her thighs and stripped off his clothes. His body was the color of brandy. He gripped her around the waist and pulled her towards him. She gasped at how easily he entered her.

They coiled and uncoiled in a slow and ancient rhythm. He seemed to know secrets about her body she didn’t know herself. She threw back her head in a silent scream. ‘Oh God, yes … yes … like that ...’

And then he stopped.

She opened her eyes. He was staring at her, and there was a look on his face she had not seen before. Suddenly she was frightened.

‘What's wrong?’

She felt his fingers tracing the contours of her neck.

‘Michel?’

His fingers tightened around her throat.

‘Michel?’

But then he kissed her, and she groaned underneath him. He started to move inside her again and she thought she heard him whisper: ‘I'm never

going to let you go again.’

It made no sense. But then she felt her climax building a third time and it didn’t matter anymore. Colors exploded inside her head and she wrapped her arms and legs around his hard, warm body and told him she loved him, which she almost did. She was ready to fall in love with any man who could make her feel like this.

Valentine was asleep. She lay on her side, her knees pulled up and her hands tucked under her chin like a child. His shadow fell across her face.

In the dark it was easy to imagine this was Adrienne. She could have been her twin. He wondered how a small boy could remember so much. Perhaps it was all in his imagination. Perhaps she was only like the Adrienne he wanted to remember.

He leaned closer, breathed in the scent of her hair. If he closed his eyes he could still see her combing it out with her pearl-handled brush. Putting on a green frock; ‘I have to go out for a little while.’

His lips brushed her cheek.

‘Don’t leave me again,’ he whispered.

Something had happened to him, he had never felt that way before. He had never made love to any woman before without being overcome with rage and contempt. But not Valentine. He couldn't hurt her, not now. She had been waiting for him, after all. He didn’t care what had happened in the past, not anymore. All that mattered was she was here, now, and she would never go away again.

Valentine stirred in her sleep. Her eyes flickered open. ‘Michel?’

He kissed her tenderly.

‘What time is it?’

He reached for his watch on the bedside table. ‘Just after midnight.’

‘I must get home.’

He slid his hand under the sheet. ‘Not yet.’

‘Don't do that ...’

‘I don't want you to go home yet.’

‘Please, Michel …’

‘You can go home later.’

He kissed her throat.

‘Michel ...’

‘I love you, Valentine. I might never let you go again.’

And he started to make love to her again.

♦ ♦ ♦

When Valentine got back to the apartment the light was still on in the study. She crept to the doorway. Jean-Claude was asleep in his big armchair, a book open on his lap.

He looked so old. Grey wisps of hair were pulled tight across his scalp and in the yellow splash of the lamp his skin looked thin as parchment.

She laid a hand on his shoulder. ‘Papa.’ He started awake. ‘It's all right, Papa, it's me. Valentine.’

‘Ah, Valentine …’

‘What are you doing awake? It's late. You should be in bed.’

‘What time is it?’ •

‘Late.’

‘I won't ask what you've been doing till this time of the morning.’

‘Papa, I'm almost twenty years old. You can't run my life any more. Anyway, I told you I'd be late. Did you get yourself some dinner?’

‘I wasn't hungry.’ She tried to help him to his feet, but he brushed her hand away. ‘I'm all right. I can manage.’

‘Let me help you.’

‘I said, I'm all right. I'll have to manage when you're gone, won't I?’

‘What do you mean 'gone'?’

‘You know what I mean.’

‘Papa ...’

‘Goodnight, Valentine.’

He stumbled into his bedroom and shut the door behind him.

Valentine turned off the lamp.

‘I won't leave you, Papa,’ she whispered. ‘I promise you. No matter what, I won't leave you.’

CHAPTER 29

Budjinski stared at the strip light in the ceiling. ‘Unbelievable,’ he muttered. He took a deep breath and re-read the batch of cables on his desk. During the last few weeks they had flooded into St Cloud from all over Asia; Manila, Kuala Lumpur, Karachi, Tehran, Beirut, Calcutta, Jakarta, Jogjakarta, Tokyo and Osaka. Some of the cases went back as far as 1968.

After he had discarded those that did not seem to fit the pattern he was looking for, the cables fell into two distinct groups. The first group appeared to be similar in execution to the murders in Singapore and New Delhi. Like this one from Manila:

1114172
TO: IP PARIS
IN RESPONSE TO YOUR REQUEST 514172 WE WISH TO ADVISE YOU OF AN UNCLOSED FILE OF ROBBERY AT SHERATON HOTEL 23/10/70 STOP TOURIST AND GEM- STONE PROPRIETOR FOUND DEAD IN HOTEL SUITE STOP TOURIST LATER IDENTIFIED AS TWENTY THREE YEAR OLD UNITED STATES FEMALE JENNY MARKOWITZ STOP GEMS TO VALUE FIVE HUNDRED THOUSAND PESOS STILL MISSING STOP
REQUEST ASSISTANCE IN LOCATING AND DETAINING POSSIBLE SUSPECTS STOP EXTRADITION WILL BE REQUESTED STOP
END IP MANILA
SIGNED: SERGIO OSMENA (COL.)
PHILIPPINES POLICE DEPARTMENT (INTERPOL DIVISION)

But there was a second group of unsolved crimes that, although apparently quite different, also intrigued him. They all involved a woman, usually young, and almost always an employee of a jewelry store. She would use drugs to disable her employer and then flee with the contents of his safe. Like this cable from Hong Kong:

1214172
TO: IP PARIS

IN RESPONSE TO YOUR REQUEST 514172 WE WISH TO ADVISE YOU OF OPEN FILE OF ROBBERY REPORTED 18/5/71 AT NG FAT CHOW TRADING PTY LTD 732 NANKING ROAD KOWLOON MISSING JEWELRY AND PRECIOUS STONES VALUE FOUR HUNDRED THOUSAND DOLLARS HONG KONG STOP. ROBBERY PERPETRATED BY EMPLOYEE WHO DRUGGED EMPLOYER WITH UNKNOWN SUBSTANCE STOP SUSPECT IDENTIFIED AS 20 YO FEMALE ROSE KEE STOP BELIEVED TO HAVE FLED HONG KONG STOP PHOTOGRAPH OF SUSPECT AND PHYSICAL DESCRIPTION ATTACHED STOP

REQUEST URGENT ASSISTANCE IN LOCATING THIS PERSON STOP IF DETAINED EXTRADITION WILL BE REQUESTED STOP

END IP HONG KONG

SIGNED: ARTHUR GREAVES (DET. INSPECTOR)

ROYAL HONG KONG POLICE (INTERPOL DIVISION)

There were a dozen similar cables. Only one of these reports indicated the presence of another individual; blond hair, Southern European, 20-25 years old, six feet, using the name Romeo Bellini. The description did not match the Alan Regan - ‘Latin descent, six-foot, dark hair’ - wanted by the Singapore police.

And yet.

A man could disguise his appearance. From the sketchy details he now held in his hands it appeared that there were remarkable similarities in style and execution between all these robberies and murders.

They all involved women. They all involved jewel robberies and all the women had disappeared.

What if these missing women had not been responsible for the crimes? What if they too had been killed, and their bodies disposed of? What if all these crimes were the work of one man?

It was possible.

He stubbed out another *Gauloise* in his ashtray.

‘I've got you, you bastard,’ Budjinski said. He gathered all the cables into a file and headed for the door.

The Secretary-General frowned as he looked through the cables Budjinski had thrown on his desk. ‘It is all inconclusive. You're only guessing, Budjinski.’

‘I'm not guessing,’ Budjinski said. ‘It's obvious. It's staring us right in the face!’

‘Nevertheless, it is not enough to justify an expedition to Asia. That is not what you are paid to do.’

‘We may have stumbled across a mass murderer here! The first of these cases goes back to February 1968! Over four years and perhaps as many as sixteen murders!’

‘Yes, it's possible. But I still do not see how I can justify the expense of anything like what you are proposing. He could be anywhere. We will operate through the normal channels.’

‘Please, Sir, I—’

‘You've been working too hard lately, René. Take it easy. You should have taken more time—’

‘I don't need more time!’

‘You came back to work too soon. Even if I thought dispatching an officer to liaise on this case was a good idea - which I don't - you'd be the last one I'd pick.’

‘I'm going to get him, sir.’

‘Good. Helping catch criminals is your job. But do it the usual way. Assist and inform, Captain. You're not in Homicide now.’

‘Yes, sir.’ Budjinski picked up the folder and walked out of the office.

Alan Regan. Is that your name? Whoever you are, you’re mine now.

CHAPTER 30

‘So when do I meet this boyfriend of yours?’

Jean-Claude stood in the bathroom doorway and watched as she put gloss on her lips. Valentine examined her reflection in the glass. ‘Soon. I promise.’

‘You could bring him up here one afternoon for tea.’

‘Perhaps when I know him better.’

‘You don't want him to meet me, do you?’

‘Of course I do. Have you seen my scarf? The Hermès.’

‘It's on the hall stand where you left it last night. I just want to meet him once. You don't have to be ashamed of me, you know. I know how to behave. I dined with royalty when I was with the *Service Publique*.’

Valentine ran to the hall stand and tied the scarf around her hair. ‘It's just that afternoon tea isn't quite his thing, you know.’

‘What is this young man's thing?’

‘He likes restaurants, nightclubs. The casino.’

‘The casino! And it's too much to ask him to spare one afternoon from gambling away his money to have tea with us?’

‘Where's my bag?’

‘In your room underneath the bed.’

Valentine ran back into her bedroom, got down on to her knees and peered under the bed. Jean- Claude was reminded of his raucous little tomboy in Dakar. ‘I just want to meet him, that's all.’

‘Then why don't you come downstairs and say hello. He'll be here soon.’

‘Why doesn't he ever come up here?’

‘I don't know why. Because I said I'd meet him downstairs I suppose.’ Valentine stood up. ‘How do I look?’

Jean-Claude examined her critically. A change had come over her in the last few weeks, since she had been seeing this latest man. She had become distant and distracted, and her cheeks seemed to glow from some inner radiance. Now, in the black Patou copy that showed off her legs, and her hair teased into a chignon, she looked achingly young and exquisitely beautiful.

‘You'll catch your death,’ he said.

She kissed him on the cheek. ‘Thank you, Papa.’

‘He's special this one, isn't he?’

‘What do you mean?’

‘You've seen him every day for practically three weeks. Do you love him?’

A horn sounded in the street. ‘That's him!’ Valentine shrieked and ran laughing for the door.

Jean-Claude peered down into the street. ‘He's got a different car.’

‘He hires them.’

‘Hires them?’

‘*A bientôt!*’

‘Valentine!’

‘Papa?’

He hesitated. ‘Enjoy yourself.’

The door slammed shut behind her.

Jean-Claude watched from the window as she ran across the street and jumped into the black Porsche. It disappeared, with a throaty growl, up the street.

He sighed and turned away from the window, tried to ignore the sense of foreboding. Just an old man pining for his daughter growing away from him, he told himself. That's all.

♦ ♦ ♦

The Pont D'Alexandre Trois was silhouetted against a twilight sky. Michel and Valentine walked across, hand-in-hand, towards the floodlit dome of the Invalides.

‘I have to leave soon.’

‘How soon?’

‘Three more days.’

She had known it could not be forever. She had known that from the beginning. ‘Well, three days is a long time.’

‘I have to get back to work.’

‘That's all right. I promise I won't make it hard for you.’

He turned her around to face him. ‘Being who you are, you could not make it any harder to leave you. That is why I want you to come with me.’

‘But, I can't.’

‘What?’

‘I can't.’

‘Why not?’

‘Paris is my home.’

‘That's not an answer.’

‘I'm sorry. It’s the only answer I have.’

‘But you love me!’

She stared at him, stunned by his reaction. It was an odd thing to say. Not I love you; You love me.

‘Yes, I think I do.’

‘Then why not?’

She knew he could not understand. Perhaps a man who had never had a family could never understand.

‘It's your father, isn't it?’

‘He'll die if I leave. I can't just abandon him.’

‘We have our whole life in front of us! He's had his.’

‘I'm sorry. Please try to understand.’ He turned away from her, defeated. She gingerly placed one hand on his. ‘We still have three days.’

‘I envy him. I wish someone would love me that much.’

‘I do.’

‘No, you don't. Not yet.’

He looked suddenly like a small boy. He put his head on her shoulder and she stroked his hair, startled and suddenly afraid for him. All men were little boys really, she thought. Behind the face that they put on for the world, they were just little boys.

♦ ♦ ♦

‘What's the matter?’

‘Nothing, Papa.’

‘Of course something is wrong. Your coffee's getting cold and you haven't touched your croissant.’

‘I'm just not hungry.’

‘You were crying last night. I heard you. These walls are very thin you know.’

‘I wasn't crying.’

‘I'm not a fool, Valentine. Have you seen yourself this morning? I can tell when a woman's been crying. I’m a man who has had a lot of practice with that.

Valentine covered her face with her hands. ‘He's leaving. He's going back to Hong Kong or Singapore or somewhere.’

‘Who? This boyfriend of yours?’

‘He was only in Paris on business. Now he has to go back.’

Jean-Claude held out his arms. Valentine came around the table and flopped miserably onto his lap. ‘I warned you about this, didn't I? You should have listened to me.’

‘I love him, Papa.’

‘But he doesn't love you, does he?’ He felt Valentine stiffen in his arms. ‘Does he?’

‘Actually, I think he does.’

‘You think - or you know?’

‘He wants me to go with him.’

‘And what did you say?’

‘I said no, of course.’

‘Did you want to go with him?’

Valentine nodded.

‘You said no because of me, then.’ Jean-Claude said. You selfish old fool, he told himself. She is willing to give up her career, some man that she loves, her whole life, everything, for you.

But isn't that what you wanted?

‘I'd better get ready for work,’ she said.

‘Valentine, call him up. If you want to … tell him you'll go. Please … don't worry about me.’

Valentine kissed him on the forehead. ‘I'll be home about six tonight. I'll cook your favorite, bourguignon.’

A quarter of an hour later, as she put on her coat and scarf, Jean-Claude was still sitting at the breakfast table, staring at the wall. ‘Goodbye Papa,’ Valentine called.

But he didn't answer. Valentine closed the door gently behind her.

♦ ♦ ♦

Michel watched her leave the apartment from the doorway of the boulangerie across the street. He waited a few minutes, then took a pair of black leather gloves from his pocket and slipped them on. He walked quickly across the street. He had taken an impression of Valentine's key one afternoon while she slept. He let himself in and decided to take the stairs rather than the elevator.

Jean-Claude heard the front door open and close. He assumed it was his daughter. 'Valentine? What did you forget?' He looked up from his newspaper and saw a stranger standing in the doorway of his living room. The man had on a knee-length black leather coat and expensive shoes.

'Hello Jean-Claude. May I come in?'

'Who the hell are you?'

'You know who I am.' He stood in the middle of the room with his hands in the pockets of his coat and looked around, as if he was thinking of buying the place. 'Have I disturbed your breakfast?'

Jean-Claude let the croissant drop onto his plate. 'What are you doing here?'

Michel bunched the older man's dressing gown in his fist and picked him up off the chair with one hand. He dragged him across the room and threw him into an armchair. Jean-Claude would have cried out but he was so terrified he couldn't even speak.

Michel put a boot on the chair between his knees and leaned in. 'Perhaps you don't know who I am.'

All that came out was a squeak.

Michel shook his head. He looked around the room for the liquor cabinet. He found some pastis, splashed a couple of fingers into a glass and handed it to him. 'Come on, I'm not going to hurt you. I just want to talk.'

Jean-Claude was shaking so hard he could barely hold the glass, never mind drink what was in it. He spilled most of the contents down his pajamas. Impatient, Michel grabbed the glass and poured what was left down his throat. Jean-Claude almost choked on it, but by the time he had done coughing he had at least found his voice again.

'What do you want?'

'Did she ever tell you about me?'

'Valentine said you were ...'

'Not Valentine! Adrienne!'

'Adrienne? How do you know about her …?'

‘She really never told you, huh? Not even when she was drunk? She was always very forgetful. I seem to have completely slipped her mind when I was four years old.’

‘Oh my God.’ Jean-Claude said. Suddenly he knew what it was that had destroyed her beauty and her mind. This was the demon she had been trying to escape.

‘Ah, now you get it, don’t you? Yes, I'm your wife’s little secret.’ Michel leaned over him, his gloved hands resting on each arm of the chair. ‘I wasn't going to come. But Valentine has said to me so many times 'Papa is dying to meet you'. So here I am.’

Jean-Claude groaned as the full import of it hit him. ‘Valentine! But you and her ... no! You mustn't! She doesn't know! She—’

Michel put a hand over his mouth. ‘Shut up! Of course she doesn't know! She's never going to know. She's mine now. There's only one thing standing between us. Do you know who that is?’

Jean-Claude was not listening. He was no longer afraid for himself; he was afraid for his daughter. He had to do something. He kicked out and tried to haul himself out of the chair, get away from this sick bastard. But Michel was far too strong for him. He reached into his pocket and took out a bottle of chloroform and a rag. He clamped it over Jean-Claude’s mouth and held it there. The struggle was over very quickly. He was almost tender in the way that he eased him onto the floor.

Jean-Claude’s last thoughts were for his daughter. He prayed to God that somehow, someone would save her from this demon.

CHAPTER 31

It was the release of the Mary Quant summer collection at the Ritz ballroom. Valentine was helping one of the other girls into her dress in the changing room when Marco, the agency's hairdresser, came in and told her that there were two men outside asking to speak to her urgently.

‘I think they’re *flics*,’ he added in a frightened whisper.

The two men looked uncomfortable in their crumpled suits among the array of glittering gowns. ‘Mademoiselle Breton?’

Valentine looked into their faces and knew. She felt her heart lurch. ‘Yes?’

‘I regret to inform you there has been an accident.’

‘My father?’

‘I am afraid so.’

‘He's dead, isn't he?’

‘I am sorry.’

‘What happened?’

‘He was found on the concrete outside the sous-sol at about eight o'clock this morning. No one seems to have heard or seen anything. We think he must have fallen from the balcony.’

She felt quite calm, though she knew that wouldn’t last. In a way she had been waiting for this to happen ever since her mother died. ‘I'll get my coat.’

She remembered nothing of the trip to the hospital with the two detectives. It was a blur. It was only when she reached the hospital that time began to slow down again.

She insisted on seeing his body.

A white-coated attendant led the way to the morgue. The two *flics* waited while he opened one of the drawers and pulled back the sheet.

He was grey-blue. His right cheek had caved from by the impact of the fall and the bare white bone glistened in the harsh strip lighting. His lips were drawn back from his teeth in a silent scream, temporarily frozen in place by rigor.

‘Are you all right, Mademoiselle?’ the attendant asked.

‘I'm fine,’ she told him.

And then she fainted.

♦ ♦ ♦

She woke up in her own bed. Thank God, she thought. It had all been just a bad dream.

But then she turned her head and saw the family priest sitting in a chair beside the bed. He patted her hand. ‘It's all right. Just relax. You've had a terrible shock. The doctor has given you a sedative. You must rest now.’

The next time she opened her eyes there was another man sitting there, another *flic*. He started asking her questions. Had your father been depressed for very long? Had he ever talked about killing himself?

Oh, no. Papa. Is that what you did? Did you do it for me?

She shook her head. ‘No, he never talked about suicide. But yes, he had been depressed ever since my mother died. It’s possible it wasn’t an accident.’

But why didn’t he leave a note?

She slept again and when she opened her eyes again it was evening and Michel was leaning over the bed and holding her hand. ‘Oh my darling, I'm so sorry. When I phoned the agency to say goodbye they said that there had been an accident. I cancelled the flight and came as quickly as I could.’

‘Thank you,’ Valentine whispered. ‘Please. Don't go. I need you here.’

‘I promise I won't leave you. Everything's going to be all right. I’m here now. We don’t have to be apart ever again.’

♦ ♦ ♦

It rained the day they buried Jean-Claude Breton.

Valentine did not remember the service. She leaned against Michel, grateful for his strong arms around her. The ground looks so damp and cold, she thought. He doesn't like it when it's cold.

She didn't want to go back to that apartment. Not now. Not ever. ‘Take me away from Paris,’ she whispered. ‘Just get me away from here.’

‘I’ll do anything you want,’ Michel whispered. ‘I'll take care of you now, Valentine. I’ll take care of you always.’

PART FIVE

The Serpent Strikes

June 1972

CHAPTER 32

Michel took her everywhere.

In Athens they ate red caviar and *taramasalata* on the *teratza* of the famous Grande Bretagne hotel, looking down over the fountains and orange trees of the Syntagma while the setting sun turned the Parthenon the color of honey.

They stayed on a houseboat on the Dal Lake in Kashmir, where lotuses grew on the water like a choking pancake carpet of verdant green. They sat on the deck and watched the *shikaras* glide across the lake while a lady with a twin-set-and-pearls voice read the All India news.

In India Michel hired a limousine to drive them from their hotel at the Oberoi-Intercontinental to see the Taj Mahal at Agra. Valentine was enchanted. A monument to one man's extravagant love and power, it perched on the edge of a cliff like an ice palace floating in the sky.

‘It's unbelievable,’ she breathed, ‘that one man should do all this for love.’

‘Not for love,’ Michel had told her. ‘For grief. The Shah Jahan did not build it for her while she alive. It was only when he lost her that he realized how much she meant to him. Grief is stronger than love. For grief, a man will do anything.’

In Nepal they trekked up the Sherpa paths to Nagarkot, alone with the silence of the mountains, the only sounds the faint tinkling of yak bells and the whip of the prayer flags in the Himalayan winds. At dawn the next day they watched the sun rise over the roof of the world, the Himalaya spread in panorama before them, from Dhaulagiri in the west to Kanchenjunga in the east.

Michel was like no man she had ever known. He seemed to pulse with energy and whenever they walked into a room all eyes turned towards him. And yet he only seemed to have eyes for her.

It was like a dream, but like every dream Valentine wondered when it would end. He spent vast amounts in restaurants and rented cars, and they always stayed at the best hotels. He had an endless supply of credit cards.

He seemed to have forgotten all about the ‘business’ that had been urgent enough to make him leave Paris. Whenever she asked him about it,

he became evasive and angry. After two months constantly at his side she still knew almost nothing about him.

She tried not to think about that part of it. She just wanted to enjoy the present. He had got her through those first few miserable weeks after her father's suicide; she loved him now more than she had ever loved anything. He was unpredictable and exciting; and he made her feel more like a woman than any man ever had.

She could not get enough of him. At night they fell asleep exhausted in each other's arms, their bodies still intertwined.

One night in Bangkok as they lay naked side by side on their hotel bed Michel whispered: ‘You're quiet tonight. What are you thinking?’

‘I was thinking that I've told you everything about me, but I still know hardly anything about you.’

‘There's nothing to know. I'm a very simple man … with simple needs.’ His hand caressed the silky skin inside her thigh.

‘Do you live like this all the time? A five star gypsy?’

‘I have apartments in Hong Kong and Manila. But I hardly ever go there.’

‘But what about your business? You must have an office.’

‘My business is in my head. As I make money I spend it. I don't want to build an empire. Is that so wrong?’

‘No, I guess not.’

‘If you want to live somewhere we can do that. I'll even rent an office if that will make you happy.’

‘You're making fun of me.’

‘I'm serious. When I have finished my business here in Bangkok I will take you to Hong Kong. You can decorate my apartment for me. If you want, we can get married.’

She did not answer him. Marriage? She sometimes dared to hope the dream was real. But another voice told her to be careful. This was fun, this was spectacular, this was breath-taking. But she sensed that one day soon it would have to end.

CHAPTER 33

Bangkok, Thailand

Bangkok, Krung Thep to the Thais. The City of Angels, city of golden temples, redolent with incense, where saffron-robed monks chanted mantras to red-lipped Buddhas; a city of massage parlors where customers could choose a girl through a one-way mirror by announcing the number of their selection to a stockily built Thai in a tuxedo.

Day-glo colored trucks honked and battled their way through the choked traffic along Ratchadamri Road, their drivers perched uncertainly on the edge of their seats. They reserved the rest of their seat for Buddha, their invisible but essential guardian on Thailand's wretched and lethal thoroughfares.

In the distance the gilded stupas looked cheap and trashy beside the gleaming concrete and glass of the modern hotels.

Grace Somppol lay naked on the bed in the honeymoon suite of the Indra Hotel. She watched Michel take off his clothes.

‘I'm frightened,’ she said.

‘It will take just a few minutes and then you will be richer than you ever imagined. No one will get hurt. Trust me.’

‘What if someone walks past the shop and looks in?’

‘It will be dark. No one will see you.’

Grace studied him. His body was smooth and lean like the kick-boxers she sometimes went to watch at the Lumpini Stadium. He crossed the room and sat on the edge of the bed. His hand cupped her breast.

‘Can't we just leave here? Now? Tonight?’

‘First you must help me.’

‘I don't know if I can do it.’

‘Of course you can. I told you, it will be simple. When old Chaowas wakes up we will be thousands of miles away. There's nothing to worry about.’

Michel laid himself gently top of her. He kissed her.

‘Promise me it will be all right.’

‘Shh, now, trust me. I promise you, everything will be perfect.’

When Michel had walked into the Indra Siam Jewelry shop she had suspected that he was a hustler from the first. She had known enough of them during her short life; it was their eyes that gave them away.

But he was attractive, and very rich. A fat ruby glinted on his little finger, there was a burgundy silk handkerchief tucked into the breast pocket of his blazer and a chunky yellow-gold Omega on his wrist. She suspended further judgment.

He had asked to look at some rings, and he flirted with her as she showed him the displays. He didn't buy any rings but he did ask her to dinner. She had eagerly accepted.

He took her to the Sheraton, impressed her with his knowledge of gemology, and seduced her with talk of life in America. He told her she was beautiful. He told her he would take her to New York and Las Vegas. She believed him because she wanted to believe him.

He pushed inside her. She gave a small cry.

'Tell me about America,' she said.

'There is a big house and a big car. I have my own swimming pool and a telephone.'

'You'll take me to Disneyland?'

'Anywhere you want.'

'Do you really love me?'

'Yes,' he whispered. 'Yes, yes.'

She closed her eyes and concentrated on faking a climax for him. He would screw her all night otherwise.

♦ ♦ ♦

Valentine stood by the window, watching the red tail lights on Rama I Road. The noise and the heat and gasoline stench of the city seemed a world away from her air-conditioned suite. She felt like a queen in an ice tower, waiting for her handsome prince to come and claim her.

Michel had stopped dyeing his hair, had cropped it back so that he looked Asian again. Since they came to Bangkok he left early in the mornings and came back late at night, if he came back at all. He said it was 'business'. But what sort of business?

She tried to fill her days visiting the temples and shopping in the arcades and the thieves' markets. She soon got bored of sightseeing alone.

She toyed with the idea of flying back to Paris. To what? To a lonely two-bedroom apartment and one-night stands with narcissistic men. Michel had seduced her with his diamond life. He was exciting and passionate and fun. She told herself that when he had finished his ‘business’, they would go back to that life. She just had to be patient.

But what sort of business was it? It couldn’t possibly be legal or he would not be so secretive about it. What was it; guns, drugs? And if she pretended not to know, or to care, what did that make her?

She rang room service and ordered another Scotch and soda. Your mother’s daughter all right, she thought. Drown your problems in a bottle.

♦ ♦ ♦

Michel got back to the Siam Intercontinental just after two in the morning. Valentine was curled up on the leather sofa by the window, her fingers wrapped around an empty glass.

‘You're still awake.’

‘How was your day?’

‘Fine.’

‘What did you do?’

‘Just business.’

‘What kind of business?’

‘Please, *chèrie*, I'm tired. I don't want to fight.’

‘You said you'd be a couple of hours. It's the middle of the night. What kind of business keeps you out till the early hours of the morning?’ He noticed that her voice was slurred. Michel began to strip off his clothes. ‘Is it another woman, Michel?’

‘Of course not!

‘You never tell me anything. What is it you do, Michel?’

‘It’s illegal, all right? The less you know, the better. I get gems under the counter and I sell them.’

‘Is it dangerous?’

‘A little.’ He sighed and sat down on the bed. ‘I don’t talk to you about it because I’m afraid you’ll leave me. You weren’t born here, you think like a round eye. But you have to understand, everyone’s corrupt here. The people who clean the streets, who bring you your drinks by the pool, they’re

honest. And what good does it do them? Yes, I bend the rules a little. No one gets hurt.'

'I think I'll have another Scotch,' she said and went to get the bottle off the table. Michel grabbed her wrist and pulled her on to the bed. She tried to push him away.

'Stop it! I love you! How many times do I have to tell you that?'

'Why should I believe you?'

'Because it's true. Why do you have to make things so difficult? Everything I do is for you!'

'You said we'd go to Hong Kong. You said we'd move into your apartment.'

'We will.'

'When?'

'As soon as I finish my business here.'

'When will that be?'

'I will finish up here tomorrow night. Then we can go. I promise.'

He loosened the cord of her silk pajama shirt and slipped his hand beneath it. 'Everything will be all right. I promise. I would never lie to you, never. You mean the world to me now. The world.'

CHAPTER 34

Grace hurried along the darkened arcade to the bright-lit lobby of the Indra Hotel. She tried not to run. She clutched her leather shoulder bag so tightly that her knuckles were white. She hurried through the wide glass doors and, opened for her by a uniformed attendant, and jumped into the black Mercedes waiting for her in the forecourt.

He couldn’t believe it.

Michel headed north out of the city, along the black ribbon of the superhighway to Bangkok's Don Muang airport. The 450 SEL purred like a sleek and pampered cat. The dark expanse of rice paddies and tapioca fields was broken occasionally by bright-lit clusters of restaurants that served as fuel stops for the trucks.

The dashboard light lent his face a satanic menace. He couldn't believe she could walk out of the shop with just the few trinkets she had so proudly handed to him. Not worth more than five thousand dollars, the lot. He had expected at least ten times as much.

‘Someone came,’ she had shouted, breathless, as she climbed into the car. ‘They started peering through the window. I waited until they had gone and then I got out as quickly as I could.’ She told her story as if she was somehow heroic.

‘It was just one of the guests at the hotel,’ he had told her. ‘They were looking at something in the window. Why should anyone suspect anything?’

He had grabbed the bag from her and tipped the contents on to the seat. There were barely a dozen pieces.

‘I was so frightened,’ Grace repeated. ‘Hold me.’

He had held her, his eyes still on the hotel on the other side of the road, knowing there was a fortune in there, and it was unguarded.

‘Grace, you must go back,’ he had whispered.

‘I can't.’

‘You must.’

‘No, Michel,’ she wailed. ‘Please don’t make me!’

He thought about doing it himself. But that would be suicidal. The whole point of doing things this way was that he was never seen. There should be nothing to link him with the jewelry store or with her.

‘He struggled.’

‘What?’

‘Chaowas. I think he knew. The way he looked at me. He tried to get to the door. I had to wrestle with him, right there in his office. You said the powder would knock him out straight away!’

‘Perhaps you didn’t give him enough.’ He put the car into gear and pulled out into the crush of the evening traffic. ‘Don’t worry. Everything will be all right.’

Grace calmed down during the drive to the airport. She curled up on the passenger seat and cried softly.

About ten minutes from Don Muang, Michel turned off the highway onto an unlit track that ran between the rice paddies.

‘Where are we going?’

‘We have to hide the diamonds,’ he told her. ‘You can't carry them on the plane in your shoulder bag.’

He glanced in the rear vision mirror. No one behind them. He stopped the car and turned off the engine. Grace smiled up at him. ‘We did it,’ she whispered.

‘Yes, my darling. We did it.’

Stupid bitch! Five thousand dollars! That would barely pay for dinner in the Hong Kong Peninsula! You think I can live on that?

‘What time does our flight leave?’ Grace said.

‘One o'clock. Pan Am to San Francisco.’

‘I was so frightened,’ Grace repeated.

Michel smiled. Her pretty, stupid face smiled back at him. He reached out and held her. He felt the pulse beating in her neck, so tender, so soft. Like a tiny bird.

He brushed her hair away from her shoulder to expose her throat completely.

It was harder to hate them, since Valentine. Now they were just a nuisance.

‘Do you love me?’ Grace whispered.

‘Of course,’ Michel said.

How could she have been so stupid? He had invested so much time and trouble in this stupid girl and she had walked out of the store with a handful of worthless rings.

‘Everything will be all right, won't it?’ Grace said.

‘Yes, everything will be all right.’

He had wasted his time. Now he would have to start all over again.

♦ ♦ ♦

The dawn threw a pale lemon light over the Gulf of Thailand. An old man pedaled his bicycle beneath the bending palms next to a remote beach just north of the tiny fishing village of Sri Racha.

On the back of his bicycle was a bamboo basket, piled high with bananas and eggs and vegetables for the market. He rode slowly, for he was very old. Ahead of him the long grey strip of beach stretched away into the horizon to Cambodia.

As the light grew stronger he saw a shape in the sand at the edge of the surf, the white foam sucking at the sand around it. At first he thought it might be a dead turtle. Some turtles grew as big as men and their shells were valuable.

He got off his bicycle and walked down the sand to investigate.

His eyesight was poor so that it was not until he was just a few feet away that he realized the turtle was actually the body of a young woman. She lay on her back, her skin tinged a mottled grey-blue, but dusted and gleaming with fragments of miniature pink shells like tiny jewels. Her hair waved in the lapping water like seaweed.

The crabs had been at work. Her eyes were gone, and her lips.

The old man scrambled back up the beach and pedaled as fast as he could toward Sri Racha. He would have to tell the *puyaiban* to fetch the police.

CHAPTER 35

Paris

Captain Rene Budjinski studied the cable the office had just received from Bangkok:

1116172
TO: IP PARIS
WE WISH TO INFORM YOU OF A ROBBERY REPORTED ON 5/6/72 AT THE INDRA SIAM JEWELRY STORE AT THE INDRA HOTEL STOP ROBBERY PERPETRATED BY EMPLOYEE OF THE PROPRIETOR WHO DRUGGED HIM AFTER CLOSING THE SHOP STOP THE EMPLOYEE TOOK JEWELRY TO VALUE OF 10,000 BAHT STOP
SUSPECT NOW POSITIVELY IDENTIFIED AS A TWENTY ONE YEAR OLD FEMALE GRACE SOMPPOL STOP SUSPECT FOUND MURDERED NEAR PATTAYA 7/6/72 STOP CAUSE OF DEATH BELIEVED TO BE STRANGULATION STOP SUSPECT NAKED AND NONE OF THE MISSING ITEMS HAVE BEEN RECOVERED STOP
NATURE OF CRIME AND MANNER OF DEATH OF MAIN SUSPECT STRONGLY INDICATES EXISTENCE OF ACCOMPLICE STOP SUSPECT SEEN IN INDRA HOTEL WITH MALE PROBABLE FOREIGN NATIONAL 25-30 YEARS MIDDLE EASTERN OR INDIAN DESCENT SIX FOOT BLACK HAIR DARK COMPLEXION STOP REQUEST ASSISTANCE IN LOCATING AND DETAINING POSSIBLE SUSPECTS STOP
END IP BANGKOK
SIGNED: PRENOM TANONGSAK (LT. COL.)
ROYAL THAILAND POLICE (INTERPOL DIVISION)

The ash from his cigarette spilled down his suit. Suddenly he stood up, sending his chair toppling onto the carpet. With one sweeping motion of his arm he cleared all the files and papers off his desk on to the floor. Heads turned right around the office. ‘I know it’s the same man!’ he shouted at

them. Clutching the cable in his right first he headed towards the elevators and rode to the top floor to ruin the Secretary-General's day.

♦ ♦ ♦

'No, Budjinski. The answer is no.'

'But, sir—'

'It's out of the question.'

'But it's him! It has to be!'

The Secretary-General was a reasonable man. But this last couple of months his South-East Asia Liaison Officer had tested his patience.

'Let's suppose you're right, Captain. Where will you begin your hunt? Bangkok? Delhi? Manila? Singapore? Do you want me to send you off on a tour of Asia?'

'But the trail is fresh,' Budjinski protested. 'We need to conduct a thorough investigation. You know the Thais, they couldn't track a bleeding elephant across a snowfield.'

'Your job is to liaise with them, Captain. That means work with them, not tell them how to do their job.'

'But if we could track this man now—'

'No, Captain, it's a wild goose chase. Please remember that we are intelligence gatherers, not storm troopers.'

'We have to get this man.'

The secretary-general thought Budjinski looked tired. There were dark pouches under his eyes and he had lost weight. It seemed he was smoking more, if that was humanly possible. At this rate he would burn himself out long before he was due for retirement.

'This seems to have become a personal obsession, Captain. I can't allow that.'

'Yes, I know. I'm sorry, but you must understand ...'

'I do understand. But my job is to ensure that this organization functions along the principles laid down in its charter. I will not authorize you to visit Thailand to pursue this matter. Is that clear? It is futile and desperate.'

'We should be desperate. This man is a psychotic.'

'If indeed it is the work of one man, then you are undoubtedly correct. But we will adhere to the proper procedures.'

Budjinski hung his head. ‘Yes, sir, you're right. Perhaps I need to take a break for a while.’

‘You're due for leave, René. Take a month off and get out of Paris. Take two months.’

‘I will. Thank you.’

Budjinski got up and shuffled to the door.

‘By the way, Captain, don't consider Thailand as a holiday destination, will you? If I hear you've been meddling ...’

‘No, sir. Of course not. It never crossed my mind.’

Bangkok

The Dusit Thani was one of the finest hotels in Bangkok, a gleaming white, ten-storey palace at the southern end of Rama Thai Road. It was patronized by wealthy Asian businessmen and its lobby and arcades glittered with expensive coffee shops, restaurants, boutiques and jewelry stores.

Most of the customers had trouble pronouncing Mahanorn’s name so she allowed them to call her May. She worked in the Naree Jewelry Store every day from eight o'clock in the morning until nine o'clock in the evening. She had one Sunday off every month and received 250 baht a month, around a hundred and twenty dollars. It was a good job. May gave the money to her mother and, together with the money her father earned in his taxi, it helped support her five younger brothers and sisters and paid some of the rent on their small wooden house near the airport.

Most of May's customers were Japanese and Malays. But one afternoon she looked up and saw a tall Eurasian man stroll in to the shop. The first thing she noticed was his hypnotic brown eyes and the powder-white smile. He wore a pearl-grey Cardin suit, and shiny leather Gucci loafers.

She couldn't believe her luck. There were three other girls in the shop but he walked straight up to her.

‘Can I help you?’ she said in English, the commercial language of that city.

‘Possibly. I'm interested in acquiring some diamonds.’ His smile melted her. She wondered if she might be able to interest him in more than

a few precious stones. She suspected it might be worth it.

♦ ♦ ♦

Valentine hesitated, her finger poised over the telephone. The directory lay open on the bed, the number for Air France circled in red ink.

He had said his business would be finished five days ago. But they were still here in Bangkok and he still stayed out every night until after midnight.

She slammed down the phone. No, she wouldn't just run away. She had to know the truth.

She snatched up her bag and went out, slamming the door behind her.

The uniformed doorman in the lobby recognized her and smiled.

'Have you seen *Monsieur* Giresse?' she asked him.

He nodded. 'He asked me to get a taxi for him.'

'Where to?'

The man hesitated. Valentine took a twenty baht note out of her purse and handed it to him.

'The Sheraton Hotel.'

'Thank you.'

'Anything else I can do for you?'

'Yes, you can get me a taxi.'

'Where to?'

'The Sheraton Hotel.'

♦ ♦ ♦

May looked around the restaurant, awed by the waiters in their immaculate white uniforms, the heavy silver cutlery, the leather-bound wine lists and menus. The other guests were mostly wealthy Europeans, the men in expensive suits - like Michel - the women in designer gowns, emeralds and diamonds sparkling on their wrists and around their necks. May fidgeted, embarrassed and intimidated, and tried to concentrate on what Michel was saying.

'You seem nervous,' Michel said.

'I never eat in such a big restaurant,' May said, conscious of her poor English. He had told her that he himself spoke four languages. What does

he see in me?

‘Relax,’ Michel said. ‘I will order for you. You just have to enjoy yourself.’

She felt his knee nudge hers beneath the table and she caught her breath. She couldn't believe her good fortune. This man was rich, strikingly handsome, sophisticated. Why had he chosen her? May had been told many times that she was beautiful, but she had never thought that she might one day attract a man like this. It seemed too good to be true.

She hated herself for being so clumsy and tongue-tied. She wanted to be charming, sophisticated, like the Western women she saw in the hotel.

The wine arrived. It was an expensive French champagne. He raised his glass in toast. ‘To us,’ he murmured.

Her mouth was so dry she could hardly speak. ‘To us,’ she said. This could not be happening. Any moment she would wake up and realize it had all been a dream.

♦ ♦ ♦

René Budjinski watched the day slip into purple dusk. The setting sun glinted on the golden stupa of a temple, and the ragged coconut palms dotted along Convent Road faded to black silhouettes.

Paul Herbin came out on to the balcony and stood beside him. He handed him a glass and poured him a beer from a bottle of San Miguel. ‘An unexpected pleasure, René.’

‘Good to see you again too, Paul.’

‘So it's a holiday, is it?’

Budjinski fumbled for his *Gauloise*s and lit one. ‘Sort of.’

‘Anyone ever tell you to cut down on those things?’

‘Everyone.’

‘Why don't you?’

‘A few years ago I was looking at some pretty girls on the Champs Elysées and I realized I was old enough to be their father. I figured that I was finally too old to die young, so why worry?’

They had known each other since Saigon, when he was a junior *fonctionnaire* with the Embassy and René was with the SDECE. He had never known him to show much emotion. He had heard that he had been back at his desk in St Cloud the day after his daughter's funeral. It was just

what he would have expected from him, the sort of thing that had earned him his reputation as a callous bastard.

But it was just his way of dealing with things. If he worked superhuman hours it wasn't because he loved his job; it was because he hated it. He wanted to save the world, he was a crusader who wanted to make his own job redundant. Men like him didn't live long, healthy lives. It was a pity but no one was going to change him now.

There was a story about him, everyone had heard it. It had happened in Saigon, just before Dien Bien Phu. A Viet Minh had fired into a cafe with a machine gun, massacred eleven Europeans. One of them was a six-year old girl. René had been nearby and had chased the man into an alley. The man's gun had jammed or René would have been dead too. Instead he wrestled the VM to the ground and beat him to death with his bare hands, while some ARVN stood by and watched,

His wife hadn't lasted long; he was married to the job. His relationship with his daughter had been strained for many years, but he had finally been sorting that out when she died. He had called him up from Paris soon after it happened. He had been dead drunk and had wept into the phone. Herbin wondered if he even remembered having the conversation now.

Herbin fidgeted with his glass. 'Look, René, this thing with …'

'Forget it. I don't want to talk about it.'

'Is that why the commissariat gave you a long holiday?'

'No, I gave myself one.'

'That doesn't sound like you.'

'Well the truth is, it's not really a holiday.'

'I didn't think for a moment that it was. Be careful, though. If Paris hears about it, you'll be out on a pension the moment you step foot back in France.'

'I don't give a shit, Paul.'

Herbin drained his glass and poured himself another. 'So tell me what this is all about.'

'The robbery at the Indra Hotel last week. That's the man I'm after.'

'When you say, the man you're after, you mean …?

'What else would I mean?'

'Are you sure?'

'Positive.' He had photocopied his entire dossier before leaving. He had further copies of the report from the Indra robbery; he took it out of his

jacket pocket, unfolded it, and handed it to his friend.

‘Black hair, dark complexion. That narrows it down to about ten million people in Asia.’

‘That doesn’t matter. This man is responsible for at least seventeen murders in a dozen different countries. Now, if you were him, how would you travel from one country to another without being detected?’

‘I'd use different names.’

‘Which means?’

‘Different passports.’

‘So I’m going to start tracking down names of people who have had their passports stolen in Bangkok in the last two weeks—’

‘Christ, do you know what—’

‘... and then see if any of those names appear on aircraft manifests for the day after the robbery. When I know where he's gone I can—’

‘René, stop! You know what the odds are of finding him this way?’

‘It's better than sitting on my ass in St Cloud sending out all-station alerts. ‘Look out for a tall, dark stranger.' What am I, a gypsy fortune teller? Paul, somebody has to do something!’

Herbin shook his head. ‘Well, I wish you luck my friend.’

‘Thank you. I wish you luck too.’

‘Why?’

‘Because you're going to help me.’

‘I wondered when you were coming to that.’

‘You have to help me. You know that I … ‘

Herbin held up both hands in mock surrender. ‘You don't have to spell it out to me. You know I'll help you in any way I can. Just name it.’

‘I need a list of all passports reported stolen or missing for the two-week period prior to the robbery.’

‘That should be simple enough for our Embassy. I can have that for you tomorrow.’

‘What about the other embassies?’

‘That will be more difficult. Most of them will co-operate. Which ones do you want?’

‘All the European consulates. Plus Malaysia, Singapore, Hong Kong and perhaps India.’

‘*Merde*. Anything else? A cure for cancer? World peace?’

‘We don't need a miracle, Paul. Just a little bit of luck. Just a little. I'll do the rest.’

CHAPTER 36

Valentine walked across the lobby of the Sheraton Hotel. Asian businessmen lounged on the leather banquettes while tourists in bright summer shirts milled around the reception desk, some clutching teak carvings and souvenir shells; another coach party just back from Phuket or Pattaya.

Valentine went to the front desk.

‘Can you tell me if you have a *Monsieur* Michel Giresse staying here?’ she asked the desk clerk.

The clerk checked the register. ‘We do not have anyone of that name.’

Valentine turned away. She checked the downstairs bars, then took the elevator to the top-floor restaurant. He was sitting by the window with another woman. The girl was young, a Thai with a sweet almond-shaped face. She had on a short dark skirt and Michel's hand was resting on her bare thigh under the table.

Valentine felt as if someone had kicked her in the stomach.

The bastard.

Michel looked up and saw her. He turned back to the girl, whispered something in her ear and hurried across the room towards her. Valentine turned and got back into the elevator, pressed the button for the ground floor. Just as the doors closed, Michel jumped in beside her.

‘Valentine. What are you doing here?’

‘You shit.’

‘What's wrong?’

‘What's wrong? The girl! You're with another girl!’

‘She's a business associate.’

‘What business are you in? Male prostitution?’

‘Please, Valentine. Just go back to the hotel and wait for me. We'll discuss it later.’

‘The three of us?’

‘Please, *chèrie*, it's just business.’

The elevator doors opened. He tried to grab her arm. She wrenched herself free and ran across the lobby. She jumped into a taxi waiting in the forecourt.

‘The Siam Intercontinental,’ she told the driver.

Michel leaned in the passenger window. ‘It’s not what you think! It will all be all right. I promise!’

‘Get away from me!’ She turned back to the driver. ‘Just drive!’

She heard Michel calling out her name as they sped away down Rama I Street.

Well, she thought, you've got what you deserve. He's just another smooth-talking bastard with his brains in his pants. And now she was crying. She had never cried over a man before.

Well, it was over now. The spell was broken. She hated this fucking city. It was hot and corrupt and shiny and rotten. The night was dark and there were no stars.

Valentine collected the whisky miniatures from the mini bar and downed three of them, one after the other. Then she stripped off her clothes and ran a shower.

She forced herself to endure an ice-cold spray until the cold needles of water began to hurt, trying to shock the numbness out of her system. She had to get out of here. She could try to make sense of it later.

She didn't hear the key turn in the lock.

Michel eased the door shut behind him and went into the bathroom. When he slid the shower screen aside, Valentine spun around and let out a scream.

She quickly recovered her poise. He was staring at her the way he did when he wanted sex. Well, fuck you, Michel. Never again. See what you’re missing; she pushed the tangled wet curls away from her face. She tried to sound casual. ‘You got here fast.’

‘I followed you in another taxi.’

‘A busy boy like you ought to save your energy.’

‘It's not what you think.’

‘I don’t think anything anymore.’

‘You have to believe me.’

‘Give me a towel.’

‘Promise me you won't do anything stupid.’

‘I said give me a towel.’

‘I won't let you leave me.’ Michel turned off the water and pushed her back into the shower.

‘How old is she, Michel? Twelve, thirteen?’

‘We'll talk about it in the morning. You're tired.’

‘Sure I'm tired, tired of waiting around here all day for you, tired of being made a fool of. Why don't you go and take care of business? I want to get some sleep. I have a long flight tomorrow.’

‘Don't leave me.’

‘What do you think I am? Some little tart you can use whenever you feel like it?’

‘I adore you.’

‘You don’t know what love means?’

‘You mustn’t leave me.’

‘Get off me!’

‘I won't let you walk out on me again.’

‘Again? What are you talking about?’

He grabbed her arms and forced her against the cold white tiles.

‘Let me go ... ‘

‘You can't get away from me. Wherever you go in the world, I will find you.’

‘You're hurting me ... ‘

‘Our destinies are entwined. You can’t leave me and I can’t leave you … ‘

He squeezed her jaw between the steel of his fingers. Then he kissed her violently on the mouth. It went on and on. She couldn't breathe. She clawed at his face, tore his shirt. He grabbed her arms and pinned them behind her back. He held them there with one hand while he unzipped his pants. He pushed himself inside her.

‘You’re hurting me!’

‘You're mine, *chèrie*. Always!’

‘Stop it!’

But he didn’t stop, not until he had finished with her. Then he left her shivering and hysterical on the cold tile floor.

‘I love you,’ he whispered as he walked out of the bathroom.

She heard him changing his clothes. A few minutes later she heard the door slam. She curled into a ball, like a baby, and wept. The bastard was mad. She knew now what a horrible mistake she had made.

She crawled across the tiles, found a bathrobe, and wrapped it around herself. She glimpsed herself in the bathroom mirror. Mascara had run down her face and there was a livid bruise over her left cheek.

She had to get out of here, out of Bangkok, now. Tonight.

When Michel got back to the restaurant, most of the other diners had left. May almost cried with relief when she saw him. The manager had already asked her twice about the bill. Michel paid the check with a gold American Express card and left a handsome tip. He ignored May's questions until they were in the elevator.

He pressed the button for the sixteenth floor. 'Where are we going?'

'To my room. I want you to see the view.'

'I have to go.'

'No, you don't. It's your day off.'

'Who was that woman?'

The doors opened. Michel put an arm around her waist and guided her out. He led her along the hushed corridor to his room. When they were inside he closed the door and threw the key on the bedside table. May stood in the middle of the room, clutching her electric-pink handbag.

Michel sighed. 'I'm sorry. She has been following me. We were having an affair and I told her it was over but now she won't leave me alone.'

'Why you go after her then?'

'I feel responsible. I'm afraid she might do something stupid.'

May knew he was lying. He just wanted to sleep with her. But a man like this, he might be very generous. She thought about her family and the hovel they all lived in with the jets screaming overhead night and day. This guy paid more for his wristwatch than they paid for rent in a whole year.

If she brought home a little extra money her mother would understand. Her father would be sad, but he would be happy to take it.

Michel took off shirt. There were bloody scratches down his ribs. 'What happened?'

'She got hysterical. She was jealous of you.'

She couldn't imagine a round eye woman like that being jealous of her. She liked the idea of it even though it seemed unlikely. He took down his

pants. He had a good body, well-muscled and lean. She could do worse things for money.

He kissed her, ran a hand along her arm. ‘I can make all your dreams come true, do you know that?’

‘You don’t know May’s dreams yet.’

‘Then you must tell me. I am a very generous man, May. You just have to trust me.’

She let him kiss her. She thought about telling him that she was very nearly a virgin but she didn’t want to spoil it. She had never done anything like this before. She hoped it would be worth it.

♦ ♦ ♦

Valentine threw her clothes into her case, then picked up her bag from the table. She quickly checked the contents.

Her passport was gone.

‘No,’ she said, ‘no, he wouldn't.’

She searched the room, thinking she might have put it in a drawer and forgotten about it. But she knew that was crazy, she always kept her passport there in the zipped side pocket of her bag.

He must have taken it to stop her leaving. Did he take it with him or had he hidden it in the room? But where?

The crocodile-skin briefcase.

She found it pushed under the bed. It was locked, naturally. She threw it on the bed in disgust.

Her father had had a briefcase with six tumblers, like this one, when he was with the *Service Publique*. He had devised a combination from his own birth date - the 15th of December, 1920. The combination had been 15-12-20. The left-hand lock was 151, the right hand 220. He had told her it was a common system.

Michel had told her he did not know when he was born so he celebrated his birthday at Tet, the Vietnamese New Year. The 31st of January.

That would make the first four numbers of the combination 31-01. She slipped the tumblers on the left-hand lock to 310. It opened.

But how old was he? She couldn't remember. Had he said twenty-five or twenty-six? She tried twenty-six. That would make his birth date 1946.

31-01-46. She turned the tumblers on the right-hand lock to 146.

No.

She tried 147.

It snapped open.

‘My God.’

There were about a dozen passports inside; American, Italian, Indian, French. She read some of the names: Jean-Pierre Dhuisme, Giovanni Carella, Sanjay Misra. The names were all different, but the photographs were all of Michel. In some of the passports his hair was blond, in others it was dark; in some he had a beard, or a moustache, in another he had long hippy-length hair.

But not one of the passports was hers.

She put them to one side and stared in confusion at what was underneath. There was a handful of syringes, still in sealed packages, and several small, unmarked glass bottles containing a clear liquid. She unscrewed the cap of one of the bottles. It was odorless. She re-screwed the cap, puzzled.

There were bottles of pills; Mandrax and Mogadon. And money. Almost ten thousand American dollars in cash, in neat, taped bundles.

‘Who the hell are you?’ she murmured.

She threw the passports back in the case, locked it and put it back on the top shelf.

Terrified, she picked up her case and her shoulder bag and hurried out of the room.

CHAPTER 37

When May opened her eyes, Michel was already awake. He had thrown open the curtains and was sitting at a table by the window. There was a silver tray on the table in front of him with a pot of coffee, orange juice, toast, eggs, ham and cereal. He looked over at her and smiled.

‘Ah, you're awake.’

‘What time?’ she asked him.

‘Seven.’

‘Must hurry. Eight o'clock I work.’

He brought a cup of coffee and sat down on the edge of the bed. ‘Relax. Have your coffee. I'll call you a taxi after you've had a shower.’

May looked around at the thick velvet drapes, the black leather sofa in the corner, the teak paneling on the walls. There was music playing on the clock radio and the air conditioning kept the room at a perfect temperature. Then she thought about her parent's cramped and suffocating little house near Don Muang.

He brought her coffee. His hand slipped under the sheet and caressed her thigh. ‘Was it good for you?’ he said.

May nodded, embarrassed. Thai men did not ask those sorts of questions. It was the woman's place to please the man. He bewildered her. She remembered the European woman who had suddenly appeared in the restaurant. Probably his wife. Still, it had been a good dinner and perhaps he would leave her an expensive gift. Then it would all have been worth it.

‘I must leave Bangkok tomorrow,’ he said.

‘Yes.’ She waited to see what he would offer her in payment.

‘You must come with me.’

May almost dropped the cup in her lap. ‘Come with you?’

‘Of course.’ He leaned across the bed, smiling. ‘You want to stay here all your life?’

‘You tell me true?’

‘You are a very special girl. I want you with me always.’

May did not know what to say. Last year one of her friends, a plump and pleasant-faced girl named Roong, had married an Australian. He looked like an ape. His body was covered with curly, ginger hair and he had an

enormous belly. Even so, May had been consumed with envy. Marrying a Westerner was something she had always dreamed about.

Roong had sent May a letter, boasting that she lived in a big house with her own swimming pool, even her own car. May was sure she was lying, as the Australian did not seem very rich. Certainly not as rich as this man.

‘We make marry?’ May said.

‘*Merde*, but you're a stupid little peasant,’ Michel said in French, still smiling. Then he laughed and said, in English: ‘Perhaps. One day.’

‘Live in America?’

‘If that's what you want.’

May nodded. ‘Oh yes. But cannot. Not have passport.’

Michel's jacket was draped over the back of a chair. Michel took something out of the pocket and threw it on to the bed. She picked it up. It was an American passport.

She read:

SURNAME: DANIELS
GIVEN NAMES: MAY
BIRTHPLACE: THAILAND
NATIONALITY: UNITED STATES

‘What this mean?’

‘It's yours. All we need is a photograph.’

She looked up at Michel, then back at the passport. She didn't understand. She pointed to the word: Daniels.

‘This your name?’

Michel hesitated. ‘Yes.’

‘How you get this?’

‘Do you care?’

May stared at the small green booklet in her hands with complete awe. She caressed the pages as if they were made from gossamer; a fragile dreamlike thing that might crumble into dust at any moment, like old parchment. She had always dreamed of getting out of Bangkok, as her friend Roong had done, but she never dreamed it could ever happen.

Michel leaned closer. ‘Aren’t you tired of this life, May? Don’t you want lots of money and a nice car? Do you want to go to America and live

in a big house and eat in fancy restaurants every night? Don’t you want to buy jewelry instead of sell it?’

She nodded.

‘If I help you, will you help me?’

Suddenly it all made sense.

He wanted something from her, not just sex. She wasn’t ever going to marry a man like this; only fat, ugly men had to buy their wives. Strangely, it reassured her. At last they were getting down to business. She looked at the passport. What a girl could not do with something like this.

‘What is you want?’ she said.

♦ ♦ ♦

Jean-Luc Chirac was second assistant to the deputy commissioner in the French embassy in Bangkok. He was no older than Valentine, but he affected an air of self-importance far above his station. He shook her hand with an air of brisk formality, even while he undressed her with his eyes.

‘Please sit down, Mademoiselle ...’

‘Breton.’

‘Please sit down.’

The interview room was a tiny office on the first floor, with one small window facing New Street. There was no air conditioning and the air was stale with smells of tobacco and sweat.

‘How can I help you?’

‘My passport has been stolen.’

‘I see.’ He reached into a drawer and took out a white form. ‘That is a regrettably common occurrence. First, let’s get your details.’

He picked up his pen, a well chewed Bic. He went through the endless questions required by every bureaucracy.

Finally: ‘Bien, Mademoiselle. Now, the passport. Can you tell me where you lost it?’

‘I didn't lose it. It was stolen. From my handbag.’

‘Where was this? In the street?’

‘From my room. He took it from my room.’

‘Who took it?’

‘My boyfriend. I told him I was leaving so he took it out of my bag.’

The official frowned. ‘You have reported this to the police?’

‘Yes, of course. They said they'd look into it. They didn't seem particularly interested.’

‘Where is this … friend of yours?’

‘He's still at the hotel, I suppose. I don't know, I moved out last night.’

‘I see.’

‘Do you?’

He put down his pen. ‘We shall look into this, of course. You have funds?’

‘Some. But I don’t want to stay here another moment. I want to go back to Paris.’

‘I am sorry, *mademoiselle*, but these things take time. We cannot simply replace a stolen passport just like that …’

‘Can't you arrange an emergency *'laissez-passer'*?’

‘That will take a few days. We have to make some enquiries to establish that …’

‘The man stole my passport!’

‘There is still a procedure we must follow. I assure you it will not take long. We will contact you here at your hotel.’

Valentine got up to leave. The man hurried to open the door for her.

‘Mademoiselle … you know, it would be easier if you resolved this situation with your friend …’

‘Yes, I suppose it would be quicker. But I'm not going to do it.’

‘Why not?’.

‘Because I am terrified, *monsieur*. When I was searching for my passport I found other things in his briefcase.’

‘What other things?’

‘Drugs. And money.’

‘Drugs? You mean heroin?’

‘I don’t know what drugs they were. There were some sedatives that had labels. But the rest of it, I don’t know. I’m not an expert, *m’sieur*. He had syringes as well.’

‘What did the police say about this?’

‘I didn’t tell them?’

‘Why not?’

‘Because I don’t trust them. Because then I might never get out of this damned country. I don’t want to get mixed up in anything to do with drugs in a place like this.’

‘They have very strict laws about drugs in this country.’

‘I know that, and I don’t want to end up on the wrong side of them. I’ve heard the police here can be easily bought. I don’t know what connections Michel has here, or how much money he has. I don’t want to take that risk.’

‘I understand that but …’

‘I will wait for my laissez-passer, *m’sieur*. I hope it will not take too long. I have limited funds.’

‘But surely, you have a duty …’

‘Duty? I am in a foreign country without a passport, being stalked by a man who is very possibly insane. I just want to go home! Thank you for your help, *m’sieur. À bientôt.*’

♦ ♦ ♦

The terrace of the Alliance Française in Bangkok overlooks the Chao Phrya River. Budjinski joined Paul Herbin on the terrace and watched long wooden skiffs with outboard motors, loaded with rambutans and knobbly durian, motor up and down the sluggish brown waters.

The club was quiet at this time of the afternoon. A white-jacketed waiter brought the two men a bottle of San Miguel and two glasses.

‘Well Paul, you have something for me?’

Herbin reached into his jacket pocket and produced a thick manila envelope. ‘Some light reading. There's over a hundred names on that list.’

‘Thanks, Paul. I owe you one.’

‘You owe me a hundred.’

Budjinski tore open the envelope and glanced at the typewritten pages; names, nationalities and passport numbers.

‘I still think you're wasting your time.’

‘Thanks.’

Herbin sipped his beer. Sampan horns boomed along the river.

‘Why is this name at the top printed in bold?’

‘Well, it’s the strangest thing. Yesterday afternoon one of my juniors, Chirac, had a young woman come in to report a stolen passport. The interview disturbed him. Not the usual thing at all. So he came to me with it.’

‘And?’

‘The woman told him her passport had been stolen by her boyfriend. She said that when she was searching their hotel room she came across a handful of passports - none of them hers - and some drugs.’

‘Drugs?’

‘She didn’t seem to know what drugs they were. She said he had syringes and sedatives. Perhaps he’s a diabetic with insomnia.’

‘She's reported this to the police?’

‘She says she's too scared. She's staying at the Dusit Thani under another name. She says she just wants to get back to France as quickly as possible. He said she looked very frightened. I thought you might want to go and talk to her.’

‘Thanks Paul. Perhaps we’ve got lucky.’

‘If you’re right about this, he’s the one who’s been riding his luck. Sooner or later it had to run out.’

‘And the sooner the better.’ He got to his feet, putting the envelope in his jacket pocket.

‘You’re not going to finish your beer?’

‘Next drive we have together will be champagne, to toast getting this son of a bitch behind bars. I need to talk to this girl right now.’

♦ ♦ ♦

Michel looked around the empty room. Her clothes were gone, so was her suitcase; he went into the bathroom. It looked desolate without her makeup and bottles of perfume and a dozen wet towels scattered around the floor.

‘Valentine?’

No, she wouldn't leave him. Not again. She loved him.

It was only business. He had explained that to her. Why didn't she understand?

He went into the bedroom, tore the bedside lamp out of the wall and threw it across the room. He wouldn't let her go, not after it had taken him so long to find her.

She couldn't do this.

Heartless bitch. She said she loved him and then she did something like this. He had been a fool to trust her a second time. After everything he had done for her, this was the way she treated him! Well, he wouldn’t let

her walk out on him again. He would find her and bring her back. She would have to learn her lesson, no matter what it took.

CHAPTER 38

All six lanes on Suriwongse Road were choked with *tuk-tuks*, rumbling Day-Glo trucks and buses so crowded that the passengers clung to the sides and hung out of the doors. The air was thick with exhaust fumes, so that even on clear days it was like looking through smoked glass.

There was a knock at the door.

Valentine froze. She was too scared to move or make the slightest sound. Another knock. Perhaps it was someone from the hotel. She went to the fish-eye in the door and peered into the corridor. ‘Mademoiselle Breton?’

‘Who are you?’

‘My name is Captain René Budjinski. I am with Interpol. The Embassy told me I could find you here. I have to talk to you urgently.’

Interpol? Valentine opened the door. She found herself looking down at a stocky man in a crumpled suit. He took out an identity card and held it out for her. It looked genuine. ‘May I have a word with you?’

Valentine let him in, waved him to the sofa. He fumbled in his pocket for his *Gauloises*. ‘Do you mind?’ he said.

She shook her head. She remained standing.

He lit his cigarette. ‘My friend Paul says I smoke too much of these.’

What can I do for you, Inspector?’

‘I'm not an inspector, mademoiselle. I'm a captain. I’m here about the report you made yesterday afternoon.’

‘Look, I was hysterical. I don't want any trouble. I just want to get back to France.’

‘You're probably wondering what an Interpol detective is doing in Thailand.’

‘No,’ Valentine said.

‘Well I'll tell you anyway. I'm investigating the murders of these women.’ He fumbled in his pockets. He took out a manila envelope. Inside, bent double, were several Xeroxed pages, badly copied photographs of women with names, nationalities, passport and identity numbers alongside. Valentine frowned at them, puzzled.

‘We can't be sure they've all been murdered. We've only found seven bodies so far. We think the man responsible for these crimes has murdered

several businessmen as well. Gem store proprietors mostly. He's a specialist, you see.’

‘I don't understand. What has this got to do with me?’

‘I think you do. I think you knew from the moment you opened your boyfriend’s briefcase in the hotel. You see, I think someone is seducing all these young women, using them to help him with a robbery, then disposing of them.’

Valentine felt the room start to spin. She sat down heavily.

‘My colleague at the embassy tells me your boyfriend has stolen your passport. He also said that you discovered a cache of passports and unidentified drugs among his belongings. Is that correct?’

Valentine felt the blood drain from her face. She thought about Michel and the pretty Thai girl in the Sheraton restaurant.

It is only business.

She ran into the bathroom and even though she had not eaten anything since she fled the Siam she retched into the toilet bowl for ten minutes.

♦ ♦ ♦

Budjinski had found a can of soft drink in the mini bar and poured it into a glass. He held it out for her. She accepted it gratefully.

‘It still happens to me sometimes,’ he said. ‘Forget those stories about hardened cops. I used to go home some nights and do the same thing. I am still astonished by what human beings are capable of doing to each other.’

‘Inspector—’

‘Captain.’

‘Captain … you think one man ... murdered all those women?’

‘I’m sure of it.’

‘And you think it’s Michel?’

‘Is that his name?’

‘It’s the name he gave me.’

‘Look mademoiselle, an honest man doesn't need a clutch of passports and he doesn't carry unspecified drugs in his briefcase. That is what you said isn't it?’

Valentine nodded.

‘The embassy said you found some sedatives.’

‘He had syringes as well, and some phials of clear liquid.’

‘You never saw him using them on himself? There’s no explanation for this? He’s not a diabetic for example?’

She shook her head. ‘He’s built like an athlete. Are you going to arrest him?’

‘I have no powers of arrest here. I am not James Bond and this is not my country. I have to work through embassy channels.’

‘So what will you do?’

‘Right now, if we told this story to the Thai police they would certainly arrest him over the passports. But if he has enough funds for a good lawyer, he will be out on bail within twenty-four hours. He will buy himself another passport and then fly out of the country.’

‘What about the drugs?’

‘Unless it’s heroin, something like that, he’ll probably talk his way out of it.’

‘So what can you do?’

‘We can ask the Thais to put him under surveillance. We can tell them we think he’s planning another robbery. We need to apprehend him actually committing a crime if the Thais are going to hold him.’

‘What about me?’

‘In a couple of days you will get your laissez-passer and you can fly back to France. All we want from you is the name he is using and where to find him. We’ll do the rest.’

He slid a notebook across the table towards her and handed her his pen. She scribbled Michel's name and the number of their suite at the Siam Intercontinental.

Budjinski picked up the notebook, glanced at what she had written. He turned white.

‘Captain?’

Budjinski lit another cigarette. His hands were shaking. ‘You've been most helpful.’

‘That's all?’

‘Almost.’

Valentine stiffened. ‘Almost?’

‘How long have you known him, mademoiselle?’

‘A few months, that's all.’

‘And before this, you did not have reason to suspect anything?’

‘I knew that whatever he was doing, it must be illegal. I thought he was a rogue., I didn’t think he was a monster. Until two nights ago.’

‘What happened two nights ago?’

‘He raped me in the shower.’

‘Why?’

‘Because I found him with another woman. As apologies go, I found it totally inadequate.’

‘Another woman?’

‘A pretty little Thai girl.’

‘A prostitute?’

‘I don’t think so. A man does not normally take prostitutes to a restaurant.’

‘Who was she?’

‘I have no idea. I wasn’t really interested.’

‘I wonder if she works in a jewelry store.’

‘How is that important?’

Budjinski leaned forward. ‘Let me explain something. As I said, we will ask the Thai police to put your boyfriend under surveillance, but the police here are notoriously unreliable. If this is the man I am looking for, he must not be allowed to escape under any circumstances.’

‘So?’

‘If anything goes wrong ... if our fish finds a hole in the net. . . then he will simply disappear, as he has disappeared so many times before. I need an insurance policy.’

‘*M’sieur?*’

‘I want you to go back to him.’

Valentine laughed and shook her head.

‘I don't think he will hurt you.’

‘You'd never make an insurance salesman, Captain.’

Budjinski stubbed out his cigarette. He reached for another, but the pack was empty. ‘Damn.’ He looked up hopefully. ‘Do you smoke?’

‘I gave it up. I like to stay healthy. Even more reason to say no.’

‘Can I be blunt?’ Budjinski asked her.

‘You have been so far.’

‘Why are you not dead? Why hasn't he harmed you when he has used and murdered all these other women?’

‘I don't think I want to find out.’

‘You do not fit the pattern. All these other women were in a position to help him steal something. But you … you are the wild card. You are also perhaps his weakness.’

‘Do you know or are you guessing?’

‘If he wanted to harm you, he would have done it long before now.’

Valentine pointed to the bruise on her right cheek. ‘You see this, Inspector? It's not a birthmark.’

Budjinski shrugged. ‘Then you not will help me?’

‘I think you have no right to ask me to take that sort of risk.’

‘Then pretend it is not me who is asking. Pretend it is all the women he has murdered. Pretend it is all the women whose lives you might save by doing this.’ Budjinski rubbed his nicotine-stained fingers impatiently. ‘Surely to God you have some cigarettes somewhere?’

‘I'm sure you'll be able to buy some in the lobby on your way out. Au revoir, *m’sieur*.’

‘Very well. Thank you for your time. I only hope we catch him. There are no guarantees. Some of my colleagues in the police here … they drive Mercedes and they are only paid a few hundred baht a month.’

Budjinski put his hands in his trouser pockets and shuffled to the door.

‘Captain. Wait.’

Budjinski turned around.

‘If ... if I agreed … what would I have to do?’

‘You do not have to do anything. You just have to be there to make sure we do not lose him.’

Valentine put her face in her hands. ‘I don't know. Give me time to think.’

‘It is up to you. Courage is a rare enough commodity in this world. In the end it is a matter for your own conscience.’ Budjinski pulled out his notebook and scribbled down a phone number. He tore out the leaf. ‘Here is the number of my hotel. Ring me any time, day or night. I'll be waiting.’

‘You must want him very badly.’

‘Oh, I do. You see, one of the names on that list is my daughter. Her name was Noelle Giresse. She was murdered at the Ashoka in New Delhi a year ago. It's all right, I'll let myself out. *Au revoir*.’

♦ ♦ ♦

Valentine stood outside Suite 203. She hesitated. She could still change her mind, get out of here, go back to France and forget this nightmare.

She forced herself to knock. Too late now.

Michel opened the door. His face dissolved in gratitude. ‘Thank God. You've come back to me.’ He started to cry.

This was unexpected. She didn't know what to do. She found herself putting her arms around him, comforting him like a small boy.

‘I'm sorry,’ he said. ‘Please don't ever leave me again.’

She thought about what Budjinski had told her. Seven women. ‘Michel?’

‘I adore you. Don’t you know that? Please don't ever leave me again. Nothing means anything without you.’

He was sobbing.

Seven women. Perhaps more.

As she held him, she wondered if this wasn't some terrible mistake. Could this really be the monster Budjinski was after?

CHAPTER 39

A stone's throw from the plush elegance of the Dusit Thani Hotel, is Patpong, the neon slash across the city's underbelly that promises danger and easy sex to the hordes of hungry young men who flock there each year from all over the world. Crammed into a few city center blocks are the massage parlors and bars where Thai girls in Cowboy hats and electric pink G-strings pole dance to loud Western rock in strobe and smoky darkness.

It was an anachronism in an otherwise devoutly Buddhist country, where even to touch the head of another person - the temple of the soul - is regarded as a deadly insult. The government occasionally cracked down on the more outrageous excesses for the benefit of the media. But off the main strip the shows went on uncensored. Svelte-skinned show girls gave demonstrations of bizarre anatomical dexterity and engaged in explicit sex acts with lithe young men.

Valentine wondered why he had brought her here. Since they had left the hotel he had hardly said a word.

A sullen Thai woman in a cheongsam brought them two whisky and sodas. She did not even smile as Michel waved her away with a five-hundred baht note.

‘Where did you go?’ Michel asked her.

‘To a hotel. The Erawan.’

‘Were you alone?’

‘Of course I was alone.’

So now his mood had changed again. After his initial relief at having her back, he had fallen into a sulky depression. She never knew what to expect. What was going through his head now? She could still hear Budjinski asking her: Why are you not dead? Why hasn't he harmed you when he has used and murdered all these other women?

The house lights dimmed, and a single spotlight illuminated the stage. The sinuous melody of a flute drifted across the room. A young man stepped on to the stage, wearing only a pair of loose white trousers. His skin was the color of coffee, his body was oiled so that each muscle shone in the phosphorescent light.

With one quick motion he took off the trousers and faced the audience, completely naked. He was aroused; his penis had been oiled also. Michel

squeezed her hand. She felt her mouth go dry.

A Thai girl floated on to the stage in a shimmering silk sarong, her breasts bare. She was exquisitely beautiful. The man laid her on the raised platform behind the stage and took off her sarong. He entered her immediately and the two began the act of love, their bodies writhing together like some ancient mythical beast, quivering in the light.

I can't stand this, Valentine thought. She supposed the performance was supposed to be arousing but she just found it predatory and disturbing. She tried to fathom Michel's expression in the darkness. He looked bored.

The music was piercingly loud now. The man and woman were writhing, faking ecstasy. There was a sudden clash of cymbals and a strobe light was switched on. It made the whole tableau appear demonic.

Then the lights went out.

Valentine realized she had been holding her breath. She let it out in a long sigh and reached for her drink. Her palms were damp with sweat and she cooled them on her glass.

'Wait,' Michel whispered. 'It is not finished.'

From somewhere offstage came the thin, hollow rhythm of a drum. Two blood-red pin spots of light picked out the girl, now alone on the darkened stage, and a small wicker basket. She knelt in front of it and removed the lid. The audience gasped when they saw what was inside.

'A cobra,' Valentine whispered.

Its eyes flashed like rubies, its tongue flicked in and out trying to make sense of its surroundings. It rose from the basket, its body uncoiling with the rising crescendo of the drum, seeming to float in the roseate light.

The girl edged closer to the basket, arching her back so that the snake's head swayed in the air just a few inches from her pointed breasts. Several times it arched its back to strike, and then recoiled.

Suddenly the drums stopped.

It was suddenly deathly silent. The girl had her knees splayed each side of the basket, her head thrown back, her breasts offered to the snake. Valentine thought she could hear her own heartbeat.

She watched the cobra's head sway and dip.

Finally the girl edged away, moving by inches, and there were sighs of relief from the audience. She was out of range now. She stood up and disappeared offstage.

Valentine turned to Michel. ‘The snake’s been milked, right? There was no danger.’

Michel shook his head. ‘Wait.’

The girl's stage lover reappeared, and laid something on the platform, a few feet from the wicker basket. It was a bamboo cage, and inside the cage was a live chicken.

When the bird saw the snake, it tried to escape from its prison, fluttering desperately against the wooden bars. The cobra unraveled itself and slithered across the stage. It stopped a few inches from the bars and raised its head.

‘No!’ Valentine whispered in horror.

The bird fluttered and writhed, the serpent’s fangs still embedded in its body. Feathers floated into the air, illumined by the red pin light.

The chicken fluttered again and then was still.

A disembodied voice drifted across the stage: ‘And so, ladies and gentlemen, as you have seen, beauty can charm and still the serpent. But when the beauty vanishes, the serpent strikes. Thank you for your attention. Goodnight.’

After the show Michel complained that he was tired. They took a cab back to their hotel. ‘What did you think of the show?’ Michel said.

‘I hated it.’

He laughed. ‘It was only a chicken.’

‘It wasn't the chicken. It was the whole thing. It was evil.’

They turned into the forecourt of the Siam Intercontinental and a uniformed doorman stepped forward and opened the door for her. She turned to Michel. ‘What now?’

‘Stay in the room. I'll call you later.’

‘Where are you going?’

‘I have business to attend to.’

That word again. Business. Was it the young girl she had seen him with the other night?

Seven women.

‘Goodnight Michel.’

‘I'll call you. Stay in the room.’

She watched the taxi disappear into the blur of tail lights on Rama I Road.

♦ ♦ ♦

Sittakorn looked up, his face screwed into a monkey-like grimace of irritation. ‘Hurry up, girl. Get the rest of those trays into the safe.’ He returned his attention to the day's accounts.

May did as she was told. She and Sittakorn were alone in the store. That afternoon the other girl had slipped out to buy herself a bottle of cool drink and had left it under the counter while she attended to a customer. May had slipped the powder that Michel had given her into the bottle and an hour later the girl had told Sittakorn she felt ill and he had sent her home early.

May went to her handbag and took out the syringe. She had filled it in the toilets an hour before. Her hands were shaking. She took a deep breath and forced herself to keep calm.

She unlocked one of the display cabinets and took out several trays. She held the syringe in her palm, concealed by the trays. Then she walked back into the office.

‘Hurry up,’ Sittakorn said to her. ‘I must do a stock check before I lock up.’

She put the trays in the safe, then looked around at Sittakorn. He had his back to her, punching figures into a calculator.

Do it now. May walked over and plunged the syringe into his arm. Sittakorn gave a small cry of alarm and twisted around. She emptied the syringe and watched a blossom of dark blood stain his shirt-sleeve.

‘What are you doing?’ Sittakorn yelped. He pulled away from her, staring at the syringe that hung from his arm. He swatted it to the floor then stared up at her, his face pale with shock and bewilderment.

‘What have you done?’

May backed away.

Sittakorn tried to get to his feet, but his legs would not support him. His eyes rolled back in his head. He tried to grip the edge of the desk for support but could only claw ineffectually at the thin air. He toppled sideways onto the floor.

She couldn't believe what she had done.

She went back into the shop trying to remember everything Michel had told her; she must empty everything out of her shoulder bag. Everything

you take must fit inside, you can't walk through the lobby carrying a big sack and mask over your face. Everything must look normal.

Take the most expensive items first. Start with the largest stones. It's better to take a few big items than a lot of insignificant rings with tiny chips. Work quickly, then turn off all the lights and lock the door. I will be waiting for you outside. I have rented a black Mercedes. From there we'll drive to the airport.

May finished clearing away the trays as she did every other night. Then she turned off the lights, went into the office and closed the door.

She put all the largest denomination notes from the day's takings into her bag, as Michel had instructed her, then went to the safe. It did not take her long to decide what to take. She had thought of nothing else all day.

Fifteen minutes later May crossed the lobby of the Dusit Thani, her bag slung casually across her shoulder. She was surprised at how calm she felt. For the first time in her life she felt better than everyone else; the round-eye guests, the snotty concierge who always made sex remarks to her, everyone. If you only knew what I'd just done, she thought.

She walked through front doors and across the forecourt. When she reached the street a Mercedes flashed its headlights at her. Michel had been circling the roundabout for the last ten minutes. He pulled over and she jumped in.

Michel did not see the blue unmarked Toyota that followed them along Ratchadamri Road. He thought he had committed the perfect crime, again.

CHAPTER 40

As evening fell a storm moved over the city from the south-west and it started to rain, a warm tropical downpour. The city looked grey and filthy during the monsoon. The humidity was stifling. Budjinski felt a trickle of perspiration begin its long, circuitous descent down his spine.

‘What do you think, Rene?’ Herbin said. ‘Is it him?’

‘I’m convinced of it.’

‘Did she tell you anything more?’

‘No. But I could see it written on her face. She thinks so too.’

They drank their beers in silence. For a long time the only sounds were the muted roar of the traffic on Suriwongse Road and the drip-drip-drip of water from the eaves.

Mosquitoes whined above their heads. Finally: ‘What about the Thais?’

‘Prenom's men are watching the Siam,’ Budjinski said. ‘Wherever he goes in Bangkok from now on, he'll have someone watching him.’

‘And if it's not him?’

‘It’s him. She says he has another girlfriend so he must be planning another heist. This time he’s going to get a surprise.’

♦ ♦ ♦

Michel swung off Ratchadamri Road into an alley that followed the high walls of the Royal Bangkok Sports Club. He glanced quickly in his rear vision mirror to make sure they had not been followed. He drove slowly between the open ditches and rubbish, his headlights dimmed.

Finally he stopped and turned off the engine.

May sat forward in alarm. ‘Why we stop, please?’

‘It's all right,’ Michel said. He looked around. Good, the alley was deserted.

‘We go to airport?’

‘Yes, yes. Wait.’ He snatched the bag off her lap. It felt gratifyingly heavy. ‘You did what I told you?’

‘Everything. Yes.’

He opened the glove compartment and tipped the contents of the bag into it. Diamonds and sapphires and emeralds glittered in the muted glow of the dashboard lights. ‘Good. You did well, May.’

‘Now we go to Don Muang?’ May repeated.

He smiled. He felt sad for her. Valentine had complicated everything. In the past he would have taken May with him. The ploy had worked well before. Get them out of the country, then dump them. Police in Asia never concerned themselves much with dead foreigners unless they were white.

But now there was Valentine and he could not leave. May would have to die here in Bangkok. See how she looked at him. He could almost smell her fear, and it made him angry.

‘Why we stop here?’ May repeated.

‘Be quiet. I'm thinking.’

As soon as they found her body they would start looking for him. He would have to fetch Valentine and get out of the city as soon as possible. They had already found Grace. That was unfortunate. He had hoped her body would have been swept offshore by the current.

May panicked and tried to get out of the car. Michel grabbed her, pulled her back into her seat. ‘Where are you going?’

She knew. Michel saw it in her eyes.

He put his hand over her mouth to stop her screaming. She bit him, and he yelled and pulled his hand away. He tried to grab her again and she butted him in the face.

‘Bitch!’ he swore.

She threw herself out of the car.

Michel caught her wrist. She tried to jerk herself free, but he was too strong. This time, as he pulled her back inside the car his other hand closed around her neck. She tried to scream again but the sound was choked off as his fingers tightened around her throat. She fell across the front seat, her feet kicking wildly at the air.

Women, he thought. They were such whores.

♦ ♦ ♦

Valentine stood by the window, staring at her own reflection in the glass. It was so cool and quiet in the room, cocooned from the heat and the traffic outside. What have you done, Valentine? What a mess. Could

Budjinski be wrong, was there any chance that he had made a mistake, that Michel was innocent?

She thought about the syringes and the passports, the Thai girl in the restaurant. I wonder if she works in a jewelry store. She looked on the top shelf in the ensuite for the briefcase.

Gone.

Whatever those things were for, he planned to use them tonight. She just prayed that this would soon be over. She couldn’t stand many more nights like this.

May's struggles grew feeble. He was about to finish the job when he saw shadows moving at the end of the alley, heard the soft click as safeties were removed from guns. He let her go and May's body slid down the seat. Who was it? It had to be the police, few street thieves in Bangkok carried guns. He thought about driving off and changed his mind. As soon as he turned on the ignition they would open fire. Besides, the alley was bordered by open sewers. It would be impossible to navigate at speed.

There was another way.

Michel slipped off his shoes, slid across the seat and out of the open door. He felt May's inert body underneath him.

Lying flat on his belly, he peered back up the alley.

There were three of them moving towards the car in a crouch.

How did they find him?

He crept away from the car, hoping the darkness would shield him.

He waited for gunshots, but they didn’t come. He ran faster. He was going to make it. Police! They were all idiots.

Suddenly he stopped, blinded, as a car parked at the far end of the alley turned on its headlights. He reeled back. He heard shouts, men rushing towards him from everywhere telling him to lie down. How did this happen? Michel smiled, raised his hands, and relaxed. It was over. For now.

The men crowded around him, threw him onto the ground. They pulled his arms behind his back and cuffed him. One of them kicked him. Michel groaned, and brought his knees up to his chest to protect himself from further blows.

They dragged him to one of the waiting cars and dumped him in the back seat. Cops jumped in either side. He had a heel pressed into his neck all the way to the central police headquarters.

Michel was oblivious to it. He was trying, frantically, to work out what had gone wrong. He had been betrayed. ‘Valentine,’ he murmured, through gritted teeth.

The phone rang.

Valentine snatched it up.

‘Who is it?’

‘Budjinski.’

‘Have they got him?’

‘Yes. They've got him.’

Valentine sank onto her haunches on the carpet.

‘It's all right, now. It's all over.’

Valentine let the receiver fall onto the carpet. Thank God. She could sleep again.

CHAPTER 41

Major-General Warong Lekchorn was a study in serene indifference. It was stifling hot in the cramped, windowless office. A slow fan labored on the high ceiling and a fluorescent light flickered and buzzed above their heads.

Michel lounged in a metal chair, his legs-crossed, his hands steepled in an attitude of patient forbearance. They had removed the steel cuffs, but two armed police stood at attention by the door.

‘What is your name?’ Warong said.

‘Dhuisme. Jean-Pierre Dhuisme.’

‘You are a guest at the Dusit Thani hotel?’

‘No, I'm staying at the Siam. Look, what is all this about?’

‘Tonight your girlfriend drugged and robbed the owner of the Naree Jewelry Store in the arcade of the hotel—’

Michel stared at him, open-mouthed. ‘She did what?’

‘She then came out of the hotel and got into your car.’

Michel reached into his jacket pocket and took out a packet of thin Russian cheroots. ‘So?’

‘You knew about this?’

‘Of course not. I hardly know this girl. We had arranged to go out to dinner, that's all.’

‘So you deny any knowledge of this crime?’

‘Of course I do. This whole thing is preposterous.’

Warong watched him as he lit his cheroot. A cool one, this.

‘What has the girl said about me?’

‘She has said nothing. She is still unconscious.’

‘Unconscious? What have you done to her?’

‘We have done nothing. My officers report that you tried to strangle her.’

‘Nonsense.’

‘They also found the missing items in the glove box of your car. You deny that also?’

‘Of course. Perhaps your men put them there. How do I know?’ Michel blew a long plume of smoke towards the ceiling. ‘Look, General, can I go now?’

‘I am afraid that is not possible. First, we will get a statement from this girl. When she can talk.’

‘When will that be? I have important business in Hong Kong tomorrow.’

‘It will have to wait.’

Michel's attitude changed. He leaned forward and lowered his voice, as if about to talk through an intimate problem with an old and trusted friend.

‘Look, General, you know how it is. I am a businessman, travelling alone. I went into the jewelry store in the Dusit Thani looking for a gift, and I met this girl. She was very friendly to me so I took her to dinner a couple of times. I had no idea she was a criminal. This whole thing is absurd.’

I don't think you understand. This is a very serious crime, Mr. Dhuisme. Very serious indeed.’

‘Oh, but I do understand, General. And I will do everything in my power to co-operate with your investigation. In fact, I believe I have something to show you that may change the complexion of this case entirely.’

‘Go ahead.’

‘It is in my briefcase.’

The crocodile-skin case lay in the corner of the room still unopened. Warong's men had retrieved it from the boot of the Mercedes.

Warong had one of his men put it on the desk. He tried to open it. ‘It's locked.’

‘I would prefer we were alone when it was opened,’ Michel said. ‘It is very sensitive evidence.’

Warong considered. Then he turned to the two armed policemen at the door. ‘You can go.’

The men saluted and left the room.

‘Now then,’ Warong said, ‘what is it you have to show me?’

♦ ♦ ♦

Lieutenant-Colonel Prenom Tanongsak was the Interpol liaison officer for Thailand. Budjinski followed him through the grey-walled catacomb of Bangkok central police headquarters to the office of Major-General Warong Lekchorn. The building was a maze of corridors and drab grey rooms where

khaki-uniformed police hunched over battered Remingtons or sat round desks playing cards.

Warong had a file open on the desk in front of him and his head was bowed in concentration, adding some final notes to his report. He waved them to two vinyl chairs.

Budjinski could scarcely contain his excitement. He had run from the foyer to Prenom's office on the second floor. He was wheezing badly, and he couldn't get his breath.

He reached into his pocket and lit a *Gauloise*.

‘You have him?’ he said to Warong.

Warong raised a hand to indicate that he needed to finish what he what was doing. Budjinski glanced at Chittakorn, who shrugged, as if to say, we'll have to wait.

Fuck this, Budjinski thought. He leaned across the desk: ‘I said, have you got the bastard?’

Warong’s spectacles flashed in the strip light. ‘He's gone.’

There was a stunned silence.

‘Gone? What are you talking about?’

‘He escaped from custody.’

Budjinski threw his cigarette on the floor and leaped to his feet. ‘He fucking what?’

‘He has escaped from custody. An hour ago.’

‘He's a fucking mass murderer! You let him go?’

‘I did not let him go. He escaped.’

Budjinski couldn't believe his ears. Tanongsak put a hand on his arm, worried that the volatile Frenchman might take a swing at the Major General.

‘How did he escape?’

‘He was outside my office, in the corridor. He must have run away.’

‘You left him in the corridor? Where were the guards?’

‘The men responsible for letting him escape will be severely punished.’

‘What about his handcuffs?’

‘They had been removed. It is not important. We have the girl and the jewelry. He was only an accomplice.’

Budjinski looked at Tanongsak. ‘Didn't you tell him?’

Tanongsak looked away and found something of intense interest on the ceiling.

‘Tell me what?’

‘We had applied for extradition.’

‘We?’

‘Interpol.’

‘I was not advised.’ He looked hard at Tanongsak. ‘Was I, Colonel?’

‘No, Sir.’

Budjinski could not believe what he was hearing. He leaned on the Major General’s desk. ‘How much did he pay you?’

‘Is this an official visit, Captain?’

Budjinski didn’t answer.

‘Then I believe our discussion is finished. Have a good trip back to France.’

Budjinski swept Warong's papers from the desk and on to the floor with one movement. ‘You stupid, greedy little bastard!’

Warong leapt to his feet. ‘Get out! Get out!’

There was nothing he could do. Budjinski fought back the urge to smash his fist into Warong's arrogant flat face. He turned and slammed out of the room.

‘Your superiors will hear about this, Captain!’

I bet they will, Budjinski thought. I don’t give a damn any more.

CHAPTER 42

She was in a bamboo cage.

She felt eyes watching her in her prison and when she looked up she saw a king cobra dancing and swaying around the bars. She was trapped. She could not get away.

Suddenly it stabbed at her with its fangs. She heard herself cry out in pain, and then the cobra's head transformed into a face.

Michel's face.

He was standing over her holding a flaming torch. She tried to get away but she couldn’t move her arms or her legs.

‘You betrayed me,’ Michel whispered. ‘I know it was you. You betrayed me again.’

♦ ♦ ♦

She sat up in bed, soaked in sweat.

There was someone banging at the door.

She jumped out of bed, fumbled for her watch on the bedside table. One-thirty: Who the hell could it be?

Michel? But it couldn't be. Budjinski had told her he was under arrest. She slipped on a silk dressing gown and went to the door. Before she could look through the fish-eye she heard a cough. Budjinski!

She threw open the door.

He brushed past her into the room. He was still wearing the same, crumpled suit he wore yesterday and the pouches under his eyes looked like they had been filled with lead. He slumped onto the leather sofa by the window and groped in his pockets for his *Gauloises*. Instead of lighting one he threw the pack across the room.

‘Were you asleep?’

‘Of course I was asleep. What's happened? It's Michel isn't it? He's escaped.’

‘The pricks let him go.’

‘But you said they caught him with a girl from the jewelry store ...’

‘They did. Then they left him in the corridor at police headquarters, no guard, no handcuffs.’

‘What?’

‘You said your friend carried a lot of cash with him.’

Valentine nodded. ‘United States dollars. There were thick bundles in his case, tied with rubber bands.’

‘Well, now you know why.’ Budjinski sighed. ‘They always say that the Thais have the best police force money can buy.’

Valentine slumped onto the bed. ‘What if he comes back here?’

‘That's why I came straight over here. You haven't heard from him?’

‘No.’

Budjinski put his head in his hands. ‘This fucking country.’

‘How could they let him go? You told me he murdered all these women …’

‘The Thais have the girl who committed the robbery, and they've recovered all the missing jewelry. His report will show that Michel was merely an accomplice. The getaway driver.’

‘But what about the girl? She'll talk, won't she?’

‘Not for quite a while. Your friend almost choked her to death. Did a lot of damage. She may never manage more than a whisper for the rest of her life. Not that anyone's going to listen to her side of the story.’

‘Isn't there anything you can do?’

‘I have no authority here. And this is not an official visit.’

‘But you said you were with Interpol.’

‘I am. But they didn't send me. I'm here on personal business.’

‘Your daughter?’

He nodded. ‘I’ll be in shit up to my ears when my boss finds out about this. I may have just insulted a major general in the Thai police force.’

‘So is that it? Is it over?’

‘No, it's not over. Not yet.’

‘You think he'll still come back here?’

Budjinski shrugged. ‘Perhaps. But it is more likely that he went straight to the airport. Warong may have helped him. He certainly doesn't want him back, he would only be an embarrassment. Your friend is probably already on a plane out of the country.’

‘So, what are you going to do?’

Budjinski gave her a look.

She suddenly realized what he meant. She shook her head. ‘No. I can't do this anymore.’

‘I can't force you. But it’s not going to stop until we get him, you know that. And my guess is, if you don’t go after him, he’ll come after you.’

‘I can’t.’

‘How many more women do you think he will kill before someone catches him?’

Valentine bent to pick up the crumpled pack of *Gauloises* from the floor. She lit cigarettes for both of them.

‘I thought you did not smoke, mademoiselle.’

‘I don't.’ She stood at the window for a long time, thinking about what he had said. I should be thinking about all those other girls, she thought, the ones he hasn’t found yet. But what had really hit her hardest was what Budjinski had said about him coming back for her. What had Michel said to her, that night when he cornered her in the shower? Our destinies are entwined. You can never get away from me, and I can never get away from you …

I’m trapped. I have to see this through.

‘What do you want me to do?’

‘Just stay here and wait, that's all.’

‘For what?’

‘Perhaps he will try to contact you and arrange to meet you somewhere.’

‘Why would he do that?’

‘He loves you, Mademoiselle. I don’t know why, but you’re different. He will take risks for you.’

‘I don't know. If you had asked me a few days ago . . . but now you tell me he has murdered all these women . . . can a man like that actually love someone?’

‘In his own way, perhaps. It is not so much love as obsession. I have seen it before.’

‘But what if he knows that it was me who ...’

‘How can he know? If he had suspected you, he would not have gone through with the robbery tonight.’

‘Perhaps.’

‘Will you help me?’

‘What do you want me to do if he rings?’

‘That depends on what he says. Agree to anything he asks you to do. The main thing is to find out where he is. Once we find him, I will do the

rest.’

‘What about the police?’

‘What about them?’

‘Where are they?’

Budjinski studied her through slitted eyes. ‘The police do not know about this.’

‘So we're in this on our own?’

He shrugged his shoulders.

Valentine imitated the Captain's Gallic shrug.

The irony seemed to be lost on Budjinski. ‘What I am doing is outside the terms of my commission.’

‘Great.’

‘But everything depends on where your friend goes from here. I have many associates and connections in police forces all over in Asia. Though I am afraid I do not have many left in Bangkok.’

‘Do you have a gun?’

Budjinski patted his jacket pocket. ‘Of course.’

‘Good, I feel safer with guns than with words.’ She threw him a pillow. ‘Here, you're sleeping right here on the sofa tonight. Goodnight.’

♦ ♦ ♦

Valentine stood at the window of Suite 203 and watched the sun rise over the city, setting the stupas aflame like molten gold and burning off the mist over the Chao Phrya River. Her eyes were swollen and gritty from lack of sleep.

Budjinski lay sprawled on the sofa, snoring like a bull elephant. He was an unappetizing sight, with two days' grey stubble on his jowls and a button open on his shirt to reveal a great hairy belly. He looked like a hibernating bear.

Valentine ordered breakfast for two from room service and then went into the bathroom. She threw off her clothes and stepped into the shower, letting the boiling needles of hot water wash away the fear and sweat.

She hoped Budjinski's hunch was wrong; she prayed she would never hear from Michel again. She just wanted the nightmare to be over, and to be able to go back to France and start her life over. Next time she would be

suspicious of charm. Maybe someone shy with a dry sense of humor. Kindness had its place.

If there was a next time: she kept thinking of what he had said here in this bathroom: You can never get away from me, and I can never get away from you …

The room waiter arrived with the breakfasts. After he had gone, Valentine poured a black coffee and set it down on the table next to the sofa. Then she shook Budjinski awake.

She waited through a coughing fit that lasted almost a minute. When it was over he pulled out his cigarettes and lit one. ‘That's better.’

‘Your wife must have been a saint, Captain.’

‘Why?’

‘To put up with your snoring, if nothing else.’

‘She wasn't a saint, Mademoiselle. She just thought she was.’

The phone rang. She stared at it, letting it ring. Budjinski frantically gesticulated to her to pick it up.

Finally: ‘Hello?’

‘Miss Breton?’ The soft-spoken Thai operator pronounced her name Blettun.

‘Yes.’

‘I have a long-distance call for you. Please wait.’

She heard the crackle of the international connection. Then: ‘Valentine?’

‘Michel?’

‘I'm afraid something has happened. I had to leave urgently.’

‘Leave? Where are you?’

‘India. Varanasi. Can you join me here?’

He sounds so calm, as if he's inviting me to his beach house for the weekend. ‘India? What are you doing in India?’

‘I’ll explain later. Do you have a pen and a piece of paper?’

She glanced at the bedside table. Budjinski had laid a fresh pad and two ball-point pens carefully beside the phone the previous night.

‘Yes, yes. Go ahead.’

‘Listen carefully …’ A few minutes later Valentine put down the telephone. She nodded at Budjinski. It was done. He was right, Michel was never going to let her go. This was the only way.

‘Well?’ Budjinski asked her.

‘He's in Varanasi. He wants me to meet him there tomorrow.’

She picked up the coffee cup. Her hand was shaking so badly it spilled everywhere. She burst into tears. Budjinski cradled her in his arms and told her it was going to be all right but they both knew it wasn’t.

CHAPTER 43

Varanasi, India

The Ganges springs from its source in the crystalline ice of the Hindu Kush across two and half thousand miles of the hottest, driest, most densely populated plains anywhere in the world, finally winding its way to the Bay of Bengal.

Halfway along its route it flows through the city of Varanasi, the most sacred of all Indian cities, old as Babylon, a place almost unchanged for forty centuries. It was here that Buddha preached his first sermon and where Emperor Ashoka erected a temple bearing a sandstone pillar engraved with the dharma chakra, the wheel of law, the emblem still displayed today on the Indian national flag.

All this three hundred years before Christ.

By the time it reaches Varanasi, the Ganges is no more than a sluggish and sulfurous sludge. Sewage from the teeming city is pumped directly into the river and garbage scows, almost hidden behind wheeling and screeching black clouds of jackdaws, dump their stinking cargo of filth and rubbish into it.

Yet to the Hindu, the river is Devi, the Divine Mother, flowing between heaven and earth. Devotees believe that no water is more pure, more sweet. To bathe in the celestial river at Varanasi is to wash away all sin. Thousands come to the *ghats* each morning to perform their act of faith in this holiest of all rivers, stripping to their dhotis and stepping deep into the brown swirling water, their hands raised in supplication to the fireball sun that rises across the broad bank of the river. It is considered a worthier act than spending one's whole life in meditation and prayer.

And to die in Varanasi is to go straight to heaven.

There are crematoria on the *ghats* all along the river, open pavilions where outcastes known as *chandals* ignite the pallets bearing the corpses of the dead, while widows in white saris wail their hymns of grief. When the body is finally reduced to charred ash and bone, it is committed to the river, to be washed away on the current with the rose and marigold petals.

It is a spectacle beyond imagination, beyond understanding, a riot of beggars, *sadhus* and flower-sellers, the dun towers of the ancient city smudged with the ropes of smoke from the funeral pyres.

It was here that Michel came one lemon dawn, to the bottom step of the Dasaswamedh *ghat*, and slowly stripped off his clothes. He smeared mustard oil on his chest and arms to help ward off the cold and then, wearing only a white dhoti, he walked down the slimy steps of the *ghat* into the murky river.

He stood there for a long time, his hands joined in prayer. Then he bent his knees and dipped his head under the water, staying fully immersed for a long minute. When he finally emerged goose-fleshed from the water, he raised his arms in salute to the warming sun, huge and yellow, squatting on the far plain.

He had absolved himself of all sin. He was whole again.

He was pure.

Don Muang airport, Bangkok

The final boarding call for the Air India flight from Bangkok to Calcutta had been announced. From there Valentine had a connecting flight to Varanasi.

Budjinski pushed his way through the crowds in the terminal, a flight bag thrown across his shoulder. The pearl-grey suit was heavily creased and there were permanent sweat stains under each armpit.

He was wheezing.

‘Fucking country,’ Budjinski grunted. ‘Too much pollution. Bad for your chest.’ He sat down and lit a *Gauloise*. ‘Have they called the flight?’

‘Just now,’ Valentine said. ‘Where did you go?’

‘I rang the Interpol man in Delhi yesterday. He's an old friend of mine. I asked him to have the Varanasi police check out this hotel where he’s meeting you, Clark's. I just rang him to see if he’d come up with anything else.’

‘Is he there?’

‘They haven’t seen anyone answering the description. That doesn't mean anything, of course.’

‘So - what happens now?’

‘We go ahead as planned. We'll travel together until we reach Varanasi and check into Clark's separately. I won't let you out of my sight.’

‘Will the Indian police help us?’

‘Like I said, the Interpol man in Delhi is an old friend of mine. He's told all sorts of lies to the cops in Varanasi. They'll help us.’

Budjinski looked up at the departure screens on the wall. ‘*Merde*. Final call. Come on. Don't worry, I won’t let you out of my sight. I promise.”

Varanasi, India

Clark's Hotel was on the cantonment near the railway station. It had been built in the 1930s, a grand two- story Edwardian edifice with showers of bougainvillea screening the white-painted porticoes and terraces. Snake charmers squatted in the shade of banyan trees in the gardens.

Valentine climbed out of the yellow and black Ambassador taxi and went into the lobby. She had expected Michel to meet her at the airport. Although she had not seen him, she had the uneasy feeling that she was being watched. Thinking back now, on how they had met in Paris, she wondered how many times he had tracked her before.

There was a man sitting in the lobby reading the Times of India. He looked up at her as she walked in, then returned to his newspaper. A policeman? She hoped so.

‘I'd like a room,’ she said to the desk clerk. ‘A single.’

‘For how many nights?’ The man was a handsome Gujarati, with a gold, gap-toothed smile.

‘I don't know.’

‘That is quite all right,’ he said, and pushed the register towards her. ‘Your name and address please.’ He went to the board behind him and got a key.

‘Are there any messages for me?’ Valentine asked him. ‘My name's Breton. Valentine Breton.’

‘Ah, Miss Breton? Yes, yes.’ He went back to the row of pigeonholes behind him and produced an envelope.

He put it on the desk in front of her. Valentine recognized Michel's handwriting. ‘When was this delivered?’

‘This morning.’

‘Who delivered it? What did he look like?’

The Indian shrugged. ‘I cannot remember.’

‘Not a European?’

‘Oh, no definitely not.’

‘Thank you,’ Valentine said.

She took the key and went to her room, the porter hurrying ahead of her with her luggage. She tipped him, then shut the door.

She opened the envelope, her fingers trembling:

Chèrie,

I am sorry I could not be here to meet you. It cannot be helped. Meet me tomorrow at noon at the intersection of Raj Bazaar Street and The Mall. I will explain everything.

I adore you, Michel

♦ ♦ ♦

Detective Inspector Lai Gupta Singh's office in Varanasi's crime branch was cluttered with dusty files. There was an accumulation of grime on the khaki walls. A sign hung above the desk:

A police officer is a citizen in uniform,
and every citizen is a police officer
without a uniform.

There were two three-tier filing cabinets on one side of the room and the drawers of one of them hung open, spilling papers on to the floor. More files teetered on the edge of an ink-stained wooden desk.

Gupta Singh studied the man on the other side of the desk. He was unshaven, and he had the look of a gambler after a long night at the tables. His suit was crumpled and ash-stained. Good Heavens. He must have slept in it.

Delhi had told him to give this man every co-operation. Detective-Superintendent Engineer himself had hinted that the man responsible for the sensational robbery and double murder at the Ashoka Hotel was now in Varanasi. It was an unbelievable stroke of good fortune. A successful

conclusion to the case would almost certainly mean promotion. He might even get his name in the Times of India.

‘Delhi has informed me of your arrival,’ Gupta Singh said, ‘all my resources are at your disposal.’

‘Thank you, Inspector,’ Budjinski said. ‘I appreciate it.’

The little Indian policeman bobbed his head. ‘You have a photograph of this criminal?’

Budjinski reached into his pocket. ‘Only these. I obtained them from his girlfriend.’

He pushed two color photographs across the desk.

‘The girl in this picture? She is here in Varanasi?’

‘That's right. I'm hoping she'll lead us to him.’

‘There are arrest warrants for this man? Detective- Superintendent Engineer indicated that he was involved in this most shocking crime at the Ashoka.’

‘Interpol have at least two outstanding extradition orders for him.’

‘I see. And what name does he use?’

‘He's used several. The Thai police know him as Jean-Paul Dhuisme. He told this woman his name was Michel Giresse.’

‘Well if he is in Varanasi I assure you he will not escape us. Do you have any leads?’

Budjinski gave the Inspector the note that Valentine had received that afternoon.

‘Then we have him,’ Gupta Singh said triumphantly. He clapped his hands together in delight. ‘We have him!’

CHAPTER 44

Budjinski sat in a shabby street cafe and sipped from a glass of Coca-Cola. He grimaced. Warm. The crumbling shophouses that faced the Mall had hand-painted signs in Sanskrit and execrable English: *'Chemists and Durrgists'*, and next door *'Taillers and Drappers'*. The square was filled with motor scooters and pony rickshaws, bicycles and taxi-cabs.

He loosened his tie, feeling fat and uncomfortable in his suit jacket. He did not want to take it off and show all Varanasi that he had a Beretta pistol in a shoulder holster under his arm.

He looked at his watch. Twenty-five past. Something had gone wrong. Valentine was still on the corner, her face hidden under the wide-brimmed straw hat and dark glasses. She had found a little shade under a banyan tree, but she had spent the last half an hour fighting off an endless stream of hawkers and rickshaw drivers. He could see that she was getting anxious.

A wedding procession made its way along Raj Bazaar Street. The clash of cymbals and sousaphones and the deep, booming rhythm of the drums grew louder. Budjinski stared without interest.

The musicians were being pushed along on a gaudy mobile bandstand, their music - if you could call it that, Budjinski thought - amplified by loudspeakers. A crowd was milling around the groom, who sat astride a white horse. He was no more than a boy, and he looked utterly miserable even in his princely clothes and his yellow turban flashing with cut-glass jewels.

The procession wound along the street behind him on its way to the bride's house. Some of the guests carried chandeliers of acetylene lights. Everyone except the bridegroom seemed to be enjoying themselves immensely.

He looked again at his watch. Half-past.

What had gone wrong?

Why would he have left a note, why had he not been there to meet her in person?

There were a dozen plain-clothes police posted around the square, on foot and in cars, waiting for his signal. The worst that could happen was that Michel would not come.

Valentine was in no danger.

Valentine …

He looked again.

She was gone.

♦ ♦ ♦

She had been wondering how long she should wait. He was half an hour late. Something must have happened. He clearly wasn't coming.

She watched the wedding procession making its way towards her along the road. The mood was boisterous. Despite herself, Valentine smiled.

The wedding band in their frayed white jackets, blue trousers and red caps were making the most of their moment in the sun. Harmony had been happily sacrificed to volume. The clash of the drums and the trumpets was deafening.

Distracted by the noise and color Valentine didn’t see the Vespa motor scooter until it was almost on top of her. It stopped at the curb, a few feet away. The rider, a dark-skinned Hindu in turban and dhoti was waving at her.

She stared back in astonishment. It was Michel.

‘Quick! Get on! We're being followed!’

She hesitated. Budjinski was just fifty yards away, on the other side of the square, but the procession had momentarily obscured him from her view. Had he seen what was happening?

‘Valentine! Quickly!’

If she didn't go with him now, he would know what she had done. He would vanish for good.

She jumped on the back of the scooter.

Moments later they were gone, Michel weaved expertly through the press of traffic on Grand Trunk Road.

He made for the *pakku mahals*, the rabbit warren of medieval *gullies* between the *ghats* and Madanpura Road. He drove too fast down ancient alleyways, sending small children and even an ancient sadhu scurrying out of his way. Valentine heard the wail of the police siren in the distance.

Michel braked to a halt and leapt off. He grabbed her hand. ‘Quick! This way!’

He led her down the noon-dark streets. Black monsoon thunderheads billowed over the city. A storm was coming.

Valentine was dragged along behind him, overwhelmed with terror and with panic. The whole plan had gone horribly wrong. They reached another narrow *gullie*. It was a dead end, the way to the river blocked by a pile of yellow rubble where a riverfront building had collapsed into the Ganges. Michel stopped, his chest heaving, sweat running down his face in rivulets.

‘Michel …?’

He released his grip on her hand.

‘Hello Valentine.’

‘What's happening?’

He tore off the turban. She was shocked by his appearance. He had dyed his hair blond again, and it emphasized the dark lines of desperation etched into his face.

‘They are following us,’ he said.

‘Who?

‘The police. Didn't you see them? They were all round the square.’

‘I didn't see any police, Michel. What is happening? Why are we here, what have you done?’

He didn't answer her. ‘Wait here,’ he said. ‘I'll make sure we haven't been followed.’

He ran back down the *gullie* and was gone.

Valentine stared after him. I must get out of here, she thought. Everything’s gone to shit. She ran to the corner. Two men shuffled past her carrying a white-shrouded body on a pallet, headed for the burning *ghats*. An old white-bearded *sadhu* sat cross-legged on the ground, his naked body smeared with white ash.

Which way? Just get away from the river, she thought. Back towards the new town. But it was not quite so easy; the *gullies* of the *pakku mahals* twisted between tall dun-yellow houses, shops that were no more than holes in the wall, and anonymous doorways where sightless beggars reached for her with scabrous claws. The further she ran the deeper she got into the maze.

A bare-ribbed cow, vapor streaming from its nostrils, brushed past her, forcing her back against a wall.

The sky opened in a torrent. Budjinski, where the hell are you?

♦ ♦ ♦

Budjinski got out of the blue police Fiat and stared at the press of humanity around him; women in homespun saris, brown men in kurtas and white dhotis, near-naked rickshaw *wallahs*, and tourists returning from the *ghat*, loaded down with Nikons and Canons.

No sign of Michel or the girl. *Bordel de merde*, how did this happen? He had promised her he would look after her. How had this gone wrong?

Twenty cops in the square and somehow they'd lost her.

♦ ♦ ♦

Don’t panic, she thought. Just keep calm. An emaciated Hindu, perched on a stool inside his tiny shop-house, watched her with frank curiosity. He was almost lost among all the puja he had for sale; bottles of holy water, the colored tilak powder, the trays of *lat-i-dana*, the white sweets the Hindus offer to their gods.

One eye was opaque, covered with a cataract. He bobbed his head in her direction, like an evil genie summoned from one of the dark bottles that surrounded him.

‘Please . . . how do I get back to the street?’ Valentine asked him.

He thrust one of the bottles at her, betel-blackened teeth bared in a parody of a smile.

‘The street!’ Valentine repeated. ‘Hotel!’

He shook his head and shouted something at her in Hindi.

‘Clark's Hotel!’

He pawed at her sleeve and tried to push the bottle into her hand. It was no use.

She ran blindly, away from the river, just get away from the river.

♦ ♦ ♦

Michel watched her run down the *gullie* towards the Maha Durga temple. This had been her last chance to prove her innocence. If she had waited for him, as he had told her, he might have doubted his own instincts. But now he knew for certain that she had betrayed him.

His Madonna was like all the others.

A whore.

♦ ♦ ♦

The *gullie* led into an open courtyard. Valentine ran inside and leaned against the wall, breathless.

The rain ran in torrents down the cobblestones, carrying all manner of filth with it. The air steamed. The city stank like an open sewer.

She was in some sort of temple. She was aware of a face staring back at her from the far wall, another of the countless Hindi gods. Its shrine was a domed pavilion, protected by a brass cage. She took a step closer.

It was hideous. It had a shrunken black head, with fang-like teeth and the wild eyes of a madwoman. There was a jeweled ring in its beak. One hand held a noose, another a skull-topped staff and a third hand gripped a severed head, which was dripping blood. A clawed foot rested on the body of a black rat.

Arms closed around her from behind and held her tight.

She screamed.

‘Valentine! Are you all right?’

‘Michel?’

‘What happened? I couldn’t find you.’

‘I ... I was frightened. When you didn’t come back, I went looking for you.’

‘It's easy to get lost in the *pakku mahals*. You're lucky I found you.’ She felt his hot breath on her neck. ‘Do you know who that is?’

‘It's horrible. Let's go.’

‘It is Bhagwan Bhavani. The Black Mother.’

‘It's evil.’

‘She is Kali. You have heard of the *thuggee*, the bandits who once lived here in Bengal? She was their goddess. They would befriend travelers on the road, then poison them, strangle them, sometimes burn them alive. Then they would bring their spoils to Kali's temple as an act of devotion.’

‘Please . . . Michel …’

‘Look! On the altar!’

A small black snake had somehow found its way inside the temple. It wound its way up the black mother’s leg, through her arms and into her gaping jaws.

‘The *naga*,’ Michel whispered. ‘Here in India they believe it is the incarnation of one of the gods because of its ability to shed its skin, and the

hypnotic effect of its eyes. And its bite of course, which is deadly.’

He moved her even closer and she screamed. He gently stroked a lock of her hair from her face. ‘It's all right,’ he whispered. ‘Don't be afraid. They are gone.’

‘Who?’

‘The police. They cannot find us now. We are safe.’

He led her out of the courtyard, her hand clutched tightly in his own. ‘This way. I have a room close by. They will never find us there.’

♦ ♦ ♦

Pilgrims had been coming to Varanasi to bathe in the Ganges for thousands of years. During the late sixties, hippies with tight budgets had started arriving too. Many families had capitalized on this windfall and supplemented their meager incomes by renting out rooms. Some places were clean, most were filthy. They were all cheap.

The room Michel took her to was in a sprawling tenement above the Bedi State Silk Co-op Marketing Federation Ltd. They went in up a dark and evil-smelling staircase. The room had peeling plaster and dark stains on the wall. The only furniture was a single iron-framed bed, an ancient wardrobe and a cane table. Rain dripped from the roof into a puddle in the corner.

A long way from the Siam Intercontinental. Michel shut the door behind them.

‘Poor Valentine. You're trembling.’

‘What's happening? Why were the police after you?’

‘Parking offence.’

‘Don't make fun of me.’

‘I don't want to talk about it now.’

There was a knock on the door. Michel opened it. It was the landlord, Bedi, a small, unshaven Hindu with broken teeth. He had brought a pot of tea and two cups on an ancient silver tray. He put it on the table next to the window.

After he had gone, Michel poured two cups and held one out to her. ‘Here.’

She took it gratefully. Her mouth was so dry she could hardly swallow. The tea was hot and unsweetened and as she sipped it her mind raced

desperately through the options. She had to brazen this out and get away from him as soon as she could.

‘What is this place? We can’t stay here. It’s filthy.’

‘I'm sorry, but it's necessary now.’

‘Let’s go back to my room at Clark’s.’

‘It's too dangerous.’

She put her cup down on the table. ‘I can’t stay here, Michel. I’m leaving.’

‘You can't.’ He grabbed her, pulled her towards him. ‘What’s wrong? Aren't you pleased to see me again?’

‘Yes, but—’

He kissed her.

His fingers ripped open her blouse, and he forced her down on to the squalid bed.

Don't fight him, Valentine thought. Make love to him. Afterwards, when he is asleep, you can slip away.

‘Make love to me,’ he whispered, ‘make love to me so that I will remember it always.’

♦ ♦ ♦

Michel lay beside her, asleep. He looked almost sweet, like a little boy. She tried to get up, but her head felt heavy. She could hardly keep her eyes open. No Valentine! You must get away.

The room began to spin.

She closed her eyes and waited for the nausea to subside. She tried again but it was like her arms and legs were full of lead. She broke out in a cold sweat. She couldn’t focus.

The tea! Had he put something in her tea?

No. Oh God, no. Panicked, she tried to roll herself off the bed, but her muscles would not respond.

There was a buzzing in her ears and her vision filled with a pink gelatin. Everything went black.

CHAPTER 45

Two uniformed policemen went into the Bedi State Silk Co-Op Marketing Federation Ltd. Bedi appeared from behind the ragged curtain that partitioned the small dark room at the foot of the stairs that he used as an office.

‘What do you want?’

One of the policemen, the sergeant, reached into his pocket and produced a copy of the photograph that Budjinski had brought with him from Thailand.

‘We're looking for this man,’ the sergeant said. ‘Have you seen him?’

Bedi took the photograph and stared at it. He shook his head. ‘No, I've never seen this man before.’

‘Have you anyone staying with you at the moment?’

‘Just one person. A very respectable gentleman from Jodhpur.’

The sergeant grunted and put the photograph back in his pocket. ‘Well, if you see this man you must tell us straight away.’

‘What has he done?’

‘He is a notorious international criminal,’ he said proudly. Being involved in such an investigation lent him great importance.

‘What sort of criminal?’

‘A murderer,’ the other policeman said, eager to include himself in the general atmosphere of self-congratulation.

‘Remember, if you see him you must tell us straight away,’ the sergeant added.

Bedi followed them outside. He hawked some of the betel juice from the back of his throat and spat on the ground. ‘Who did he murder?’

‘A woman. In fact, he has murdered many women. Perhaps as many as ... a hundred,’ the sergeant said, embellishing his own information.

They walked away down the street. It would be a long day for them. Inspector Gupta had told them to check all the hotels and boarding houses in Varanasi.

Bedi scratched thoughtfully at his groin and went back inside.

Michel stepped out from behind the curtain and grinned at him. ‘You didn't have to ask so many questions,’ he said in Hindi.

‘I was curious,’ Bedi told him.

‘Well, don't be too curious. It's dangerous.’ Michel reached into his pocket and pulled out five one-hundred-rupee notes. ‘Here. It's what we agreed.’

Bedi stuffed the money in the pocket of his kurta.

‘There's another five hundred rupees when I leave. Just remember - you haven't seen me.’ Michel turned to go.

‘They must want you very badly,’ Bedi said. ‘Perhaps there's a reward.’

Michel frowned in disgust. ‘All right, a thousand rupees.’

‘Three thousand.’

‘It might be cheaper to cut your throat.’

Bedi was terrified but he knew an opportunity when he saw one. ‘I'm a poor man,’ he grumbled. ‘I'm doing you a great service.’

‘Two thousand rupees. And if you even think of telling the police you'll meet Shiva a lot sooner than you expect.’

Michel went out and Bedi heard his footsteps cat-soft on the wooden stairs above his head. He scratched irritably at his belly. How was he supposed to have known this crazy Westerner was a big criminal? It seemed every policeman in Varanasi was looking for him.

He didn't like this.

He didn't like it at all.

♦ ♦ ♦

Michel sat on the edge of the bed and watched her as she slept. He reached out and gently stroked her cheek. How could she have done this to him? He hadn't wanted to believe it at first, had tried to persuade himself that there must be some mistake. But when he had seen her waiting in the square, seen all those policemen - idiots! because they'd left their uniforms in the police station they thought they were invisible - he knew there was no doubt.

Even then he had given her one last chance. If she had waited for him in the *gullie* he would have been tempted to believe that she had been an unwilling dupe, had not known she was being followed. But instead she had run like a frightened rabbit.

Bangkok had cost him everything; the profits from the Dusit Thani operation, almost all his cash, all the passports save one. Now even

Valentine had turned against him. Just as Joginder and Adrienne had turned against him. Everything he had ever loved tried to destroy him.

So now he must destroy what he loved.

♦ ♦ ♦

She had started to wake. The effects of the Mandrax was wearing off. He picked up her right arm and laid it across his lap. He tied a tourniquet above her elbow, found a pale blue vein in her arm. A syringe lay ready on the bedside table and he held it up, spilled a little of the drug from the tip of the needle. This would make her sleep through the night. In the morning everything would be ready.

♦ ♦ ♦

Budjinski and Inspector Lai Gupta Singh conferred in the lobby of the Clark's Hotel.

‘We will find him,’ Gupta Singh said, ‘there is no way he can escape.’

Budjinski dropped his cigarette stub into his cup. It fizzled and sank. Gupta Singh tried to keep the grimace of disgust off his face. As a devout Sikh he did not smoke and was revolted by the stench of cigarettes. He also did not approve of good Mysore coffee being used as a douse for cigarette ends.

‘What makes you think he’s still in Varanasi?’

‘We have men at the airport, at the train stations, at the bus stations. He is in this city somewhere.’

‘You had men all around the Mall and he still snatched her from under your noses.’

‘Your nose was present also,’ Gupta Singh said, bridling at the criticism.

‘We have to offer a reward.’

Gupta Singh spread his hands in a gesture of helplessness. ‘I cannot spend government funds on such a thing without permission. A request has been made.’

‘By that time it will be too late.’

‘We will find him.’

‘So you keep telling me.’

‘Why don't you go and get some sleep, sir. I’ll call you as soon as we have a lead.’

Budjinski reached for his cigarettes, then, to Gupta Singh's relief, he changed his mind.

‘There's nothing more anyone can do,’ Gupta Singh added.

‘All right,’ Budjinski said.

Then, to Gupta Singh's horror he stood up and took a mouthful of the coffee in which he had just a few moments ago tossed his cigarette. He seemed not to notice. He slammed down the cup and shambled off.

‘We will find him!’ Gupta Singh called after him. ‘He cannot escape!’

♦ ♦ ♦

Budjinski sat alone in his room staring at the wall.

He knew his career was finished. He had insulted a police chief in Bangkok, lied to the Indians about the extradition orders. He had done everything the Secretary General had ordered him not to do. They would crucify him when he got back to France.

Risking his own career was one thing, but in his obsession to catch the man who murdered his daughter he had put one other young life at risk. That was unforgivable.

His hands clenched to fists. ‘Oh my God,’ he whispered, ‘what have I done?’

♦ ♦ ♦

It was an hour before dawn, the moon had set, and the night was darkest. But even at this hour thousands of devotees of the three-eyed Lord Shiva shuffled through the dark streets, as they did every morning, towards the black, slick tongue of the Ganges.

The Pure. The Eternal. Stairway to Heaven.

They padded barefoot down the ancient stone steps of the *ghats*, as their forefathers had done each morning for four millennia. Despite the chill they prepared to plunge themselves into the murky waters.

Brahmin pandas sat under bamboo umbrellas selling sandalwood paste and vermilion for the devotees to daub on their foreheads after their ritual

immersion. Bells clanged in the temples and a conch shell boomed and echoed along the river.

Sadhus squatted by braziers at the river's edge, their bodies daubed with white ash, bright orange garlands of marigolds around their necks. They chanted mantras while the crowd jostled around them, some reverently touching the feet of the holy men, others snatching up a handful of the dust on which the sadhu had trodden.

‘*Hare Rama, Hare Krisna, Hare Om.*’

They waited for the dawn, the sun's symbolic victory over darkness.

♦ ♦ ♦

Valentine woke from a black and bitter sleep. She became aware of dark shadows moving about the walls. A gas lamp flickered and spluttered close by.

She tried to move her arms and legs, but they were numb, useless.

She tried to remember what had happened to her. She opened her mouth to cry for help but her tongue felt huge in her mouth, and no sound came.

‘Ah, you're awake,’ she heard someone whisper. ‘Good. It is almost dawn.’

A face swam into her vision. Michel.

Michel.

She remembered.

She tried to get up, but it was useless. She was paralyzed, a prisoner in her own body.

‘It’s a form of Ketamine,’ Michel said. ‘I purchased it a few months ago in Hong Kong. The chemist who sold it to me said it was the chemical equivalent of a straitjacket.

He stroked her face.

‘Do you remember the day you left? You looked beautiful, just like you do now. Except your skin was paler.’ He ran a finger along her arm. ‘It was just before dawn, like now. This morning it’s cool but that morning was very hot. You had a bead of sweat between your breasts right here. You were beautiful, so beautiful. I adored you, Adrienne. You were my life.’

His voice was so soft. She had to strain to hear him.

‘You were wearing a green frock, like this one.’ Valentine could not move her head to see what he had done, but she realized he had dressed her while she was unconscious.

What was he talking about?

‘I was helpless then, just like you are now. There was nothing I could do to stop you leaving me.’

He's insane.

‘Yesterday I washed away my sins in the Holy River. Now it is your turn. We must make you pure again.’

He threw something across her face, a fine white linen sheet. Then he lifted her effortlessly from the bed, carried her to the door and down the stairs.

She felt the sudden chill when they reached the street, heard Michel say something to someone in Hindi. A man's voice answered. There was the strong scent of an animal.

A *tonga*, Valentine thought. A pony and trap. Where is he taking me?

Michel laid her on the soft leather seat and clambered in beside her. Valentine felt the carriage lurch forward and then they bumped away through the darkness, the horse’s hooves clip-clipping on the cobblestones.

She tried to scream, but no sound would come.

She heard Michel's whisper: ‘I am sorry to do this. But you betrayed me. It is karma. It is the law. We must make you pure again.’

Suddenly she understood. The pony man could not help her because he thought she was already dead. The linen sheet was her shroud.

‘I am going to make you pure again,’ Michel said. ‘Trust me, Adrienne. Trust me.’

CHAPTER 46

Bedi heard footsteps on the stairs. He got out of his cot and peered through the doorway. He saw the *farang* carry a white-shrouded body down the steps to a waiting *tonga*.

Shiva! He had killed her, here in his own house! If the police caught him now, he would be in big trouble. They might even throw him in prison.

He cursed himself for taking the money. He should have gone to the police instead and demanded a reward. This was not good, not good at all.

He heard the *farang* order the driver to take him to the *ghats*.

Bedi hesitated, caught between his terror of the *farang* and the certain knowledge of what the police would do to him if they found out he had lied to them. No, he decided. It was too great a risk, even for two thousand rupees.

Moments later he was running barefoot through the darkened streets to the police sub-station.

♦ ♦ ♦

Valentine drifted in and out of consciousness. Suddenly she was aware that the gentle swaying motion of the buggy had stopped, and she felt strong arms lift her out of the seat. She knew it was Michel, knew his smell.

She heard lapping water. They must be on the *ghats*.

‘Everything I did was for you,’ Michel was saying, ‘I just wanted you to be proud of me, Adrienne.’

Adrienne.

Her mother's name. Why had he called her that? What in God's name was he doing?

A fragment of memory returned, like a torn page from an old diary.

She heard a wild root-hog snuffling in a garden, saw black shadows darting on a white porch. The air was rich with the smell of roasting peanuts.

Her mother was on the verandah, asleep. There was a bead of saliva at the corner of her mouth and her breath was sour with the taint of wine.

‘Michel,’ she heard her whisper, ‘I'm sorry, Michel.’

And then she heard André Gondet's voice. ‘My father says you've got mixed blood.’

Michel.

This was the devil that had haunted her all those years.

‘It's all right, Adrienne,’ he crooned to her. ‘Soon it will be over. I will make you pure again.’

♦ ♦ ♦

Sergeant Madan Lai lay asleep on the wooden cot in the corner of his office. He was exhausted. He had spent all day walking around the city chasing after this damned *farang* and he was worn out. He hated night duty. He would rather be at home in bed with his wife, Moni. Thinking about her plump little body made him even more restless.

He lay on the hard cot in his khaki tunic and shorts, his nightstick resting on his chest. He drifted off to sleep. He did not hear the first tentative knock on the bolted wooden door.

Outside Bedi was growing more frightened, and more frustrated.

He knocked again, louder.

He tried again. And again, this time with his fists.

Sergeant Madan Lai opened an eye and sighed. There was that damned banging again.

‘Someone at the door, Moni,’ he murmured.

Suddenly he remembered where he was. Shiva! Perhaps it was the inspector! He leapt to his feet and staggered across the room and threw open the door. He blinked in surprise at the little brown man in the ragged kurta standing in the shadows. He grabbed the kerosene lamp that hung next to the doorway and shone it in his face.

He straightened his uniform and tried to assume a dignified attitude. ‘What do you want?’

‘The *farang!*’ Bedi whispered. ‘I've seen him!’

‘What *farang?*’ Madan Lai said, his mind still woolly from sleep. Suddenly he remembered. ‘The murderer?’

‘Yes, yes! I came as soon as I could. Come quickly!’

‘I must phone the inspector,’ the sergeant said and hurried back inside.

♦ ♦ ♦

The telephone rang in Budjinski’s room at Clark’s hotel. He groped for the bedside lamp, turned it on then snatched the receiver off its cradle.

‘Budjinski.’

‘We've got him,’ Gupta said. “There's a car on its way. Be in the lobby in three minutes.’

♦ ♦ ♦

Valentine lay in Michel's arms like a rag doll. It was getting light. She heard voices chanting, smelled burning sandalwood.

‘Is it ready?’ she heard Michel say.

‘Yes, sahib,’ a voice growled.

‘Don't be afraid,’ Michel said. ‘I am going to save you.’ She felt his lips brush her cheek through the thin piece of linen that covered her.

‘Goodbye, Adrienne.’

She heard the fire-crackle of burning reeds very close and the acrid stench of wood smoke. Oh God, not that.

No, Michel.

Not that.

♦ ♦ ♦

Budjinski leapt from the back seat of the blue Polis Fiat and stared around in confusion. There were police everywhere, shining torches into the faces of the startled pilgrims. Angry shouts echoed along the river banks, everyone alarmed by the sudden presence of so many police.

Gupta Singh appeared beside him. ‘He's somewhere on the *ghats!* We have to hurry!’

They were on the Hari Schandra *ghat*. Budjinski ran blindly into the darkness, towards the Ganges. The first yellow-bright sliver of sun appeared over the distant horizon, throwing specks of gold on the river.

A man’s voice was bellowing from one of the *ghats*. A policeman was frantically blowing his whistle.

A skein of smoke rose into the air.

♦ ♦ ♦

Valentine moaned.

A breath of wind blew the sheet back from her face. She saw the tied bundles of sandalwood around her, a heart of orange flame, belching smoke. The billowing yellow clouds parted, and she saw Michel, his head shaved, wearing just a single piece of coarse white mourning cloth.

Behind him stood the *chandal*. His creased brown face twisted into a frown. He took a step towards her, unsure.

I'm alive, can't you see? I'm alive!

With a supreme effort of will she moved her hand. It was enough to shift its weight to the edge of the pallet and it fell away and swung loose from under the sheet.

The old man roared in alarm, his shouts echoing along the banks of the river. He rushed towards her to pull her clear. Michel blocked his way, and she saw the glint of a knife in his right hand.

The *chandal* stopped when he saw Michel was armed. Bellowing like an old bull, he turned away and scurried away up the steps.

Michel threw the sheet back over her face. Valentine knew it was over.

The stench of the smoke made her want to retch. She could feel the heat from the flames now. Let it be quick, she thought. Just let it be quick.

♦ ♦ ♦

Budjinski saw him first.

Despite the shaved head and loin cloth, he knew it was him just from the way he stood, like he was mocking the whole world. It had to be him.

Then he saw the old *chandal* stumbling up the *ghat* towards him, pointing to the white-shrouded figure on the bier, almost invisible now behind the screen of yellow smoke.

Budjinski shouted a warning and ran down the steps. Michel looked up and saw him. Suddenly he was gone, melting away into the dawn.

Budjinski didn't try to follow. He had to get to Valentine.

Please God let me be in time.

He threw himself into the smoke and flames and pulled the shrouded body off the bier.

PART SIX

The Trial

August 1973

CHAPTER 47

Delhi

Justice in India did not come easily or cheaply. The courts were overburdened, choked by a bloated and indifferent bureaucracy. The system was riddled with delays, bribery and inefficiency. One case, initiated in the tenth century, was still pending.

After Independence in 1948 the British Common Law system was retained, but the tradition of trial by jury was scrapped. Instead, guilt or innocence was decided by a single judge.

There were few surprises and little real drama in an Indian courtroom. After charges were laid, the police and the public prosecutor prepared what is known as a First Information Report. This FIR contained all the evidence pertinent to the case: statements from the accused, the witnesses, pathologists, and the police, as well as much unsubstantiated gossip.

The lower court magistrates read the FIR to establish whether, in their opinion, a prima facie case existed. If they agreed, the case was brought to trial. By that stage everyone had read the FIR: the counsels for the defense and the prosecution, the defendants, even the press. The document often ran to many hundreds of pages, a ragged bundle loosely tied with string, dog-eared, crumpled and stained.

Surprise witnesses were rarely produced, new evidence seldom exhibited. Instead, the counsel for the defense set out to discredit the prosecution's case, as stated in the FIR.

Michel had been incarcerated behind the thick and ugly walls of the Tihar prison for almost a year, the monotony broken only by visits to the Parliament Street courts for the preliminary hearings.

Incredibly, he had eluded Gupta Singh's police in Varanasi. He had been arrested in Calcutta four days later and charged with possession of a stolen passport. It took the local authorities three days to realize that they had in their custody the man half the world was looking for.

The case had made headlines around the world. As the list of suspected victims grew, extradition orders arrived almost daily, from the Philippines, Hong Kong, Singapore, Malaysia and finally, Thailand.

Public interest rose to fever pitch. Michel Christian was rumored to be responsible for the deaths of twenty-one women. He was profiled endlessly in India's Sunday papers. He had become a celebrity.

Now, a year later, in the crowded, Hogarthian madness of the Tis Hizari courts, the trial of Michel Christian was to begin.

♦ ♦ ♦

Mohinder Singh dabbed at his face with a white handkerchief and pushed his tinted spectacles higher on his nose. He bowed to the judge and announced his first witness.

Sanjoy Bedi walked into the courtroom, blinking owlishly at the press of faces that were suddenly turned towards him. He looked as if he expected that the crowd would turn on him at any moment. Mohinder Singh tapped an index finger impatiently on the table. He dreaded what his adversary would do to the poor old man.

♦ ♦ ♦

There was no dock and no witness box. Sanjoy Bedi, dressed in a long white kurta, stood in the center of the crowd of advocates and junior lawyers clustered around the bench. Michel sat a few feet away, glaring at him malevolently, close enough to touch. He was wearing the *dandaberi*, thick steel cuffs around his ankles attached to a two-foot-long bar locked on to his belt. His left wrist was cuffed to one of the soldiers by a long chain.

The Nawab and his minions sat next to Michel; the prosecutor and his junior clerics on the other side.

‘What is your name?’ Mohinder asked him.

Bedi looked at Michel and shuddered. He had never been in court before. He had not known it would be like this.

‘When I got out of here I'm going to kill you,’ Michel whispered.

‘What is your name?’ Mohinder repeated.

‘B-Bedi, Sahib.’

Judge Misra leaned forward, straining to hear over the hum of the overhead fans.

‘Your full name,’ Mohinder Singh said.

‘Sanjoy Bedi.’

‘What did he say?’ Judge Misra asked.

‘Sanjoy Bedi,’ Mohinder told him. The PP's patience was legendary. It had to be. His job was purely to coach his witnesses through everything they'd already recited in the FIR. ‘What is your occupation?’

Bedi began his speech. He had had plenty of time to rehearse it. Like Michel, he had been kept at Tihar for the past year. It was customary procedure, enabling key witnesses to be produced at will. The suffering this caused an innocent man was never considered.

‘I am an honest man, Sahib—’

‘What was that?’ Judge Misra asked.

‘He said he is an honest man—’ Mohinder Singh told him.

‘Was there ever any other kind?’ the Nawab chortled and turned to the gallery of spectators for approval. There was a ripple of laughter.

‘We are sure you are an honest man. But what is your occupation?’ Mohinder said.

‘I have a silk emporium, Sahib.’

‘In which city?’

‘In Varanasi.’

Judge Misra leaned forward with a pained expression. ‘I can't hear. Tell the witness to stand closer to the bench and speak up.’

The prosecutor motioned for Bedi to stand closer to the bench. The old man shuffled forward. He was now standing barefoot in a puddle of water that had dripped through the ceiling when the monsoon storm had broken. He looked ragged and miserable.

‘Now then,’ Mohinder Singh asked, ‘can you tell us what happened—’

‘Just a minute,’ Judge Misra interrupted, ‘start again from the beginning. I haven't heard anything yet.’

Mohinder Singh nodded and smiled. ‘Now then,’ he said, as loud as he could, ‘what is your full name?’

The rain began again. Mohinder had to shout to make himself heard. He led the old man through a series of biographical questions to get him accustomed to speaking at the right volume and pitch. Finally, he said:

‘Now I want you to have a look at the man sitting on your left. Have you seen him before?’

Bedi turned and stared at Michel, thankful that the *farang* was safely restrained in the heavy chains of the *dandaberi*. He could feel Michel's hot breath on his arm.

‘You're a dead man,’ Michel whispered.

Bedi felt his knees start to give way under him.

‘Please answer the question,’ the PP repeated. ‘Have you seen him before?’

‘Yes, Sahib ...’

‘Please tell us where and when.’

‘He wanted to rent a room from me, Sahib. I gave him my best room.’

‘The lavatory, I should imagine,’ the Nawab said.

Mohinder looked towards Judge Misra, hoping for intervention. There was none.

‘This was on the 5th of July, 1972.’

Bedi hesitated. ‘Yes, Sahib.’

‘And how was he dressed?’

‘He wore a turban, Sahib. And a dhoti and a white shirt.’

‘So he was in disguise?’

‘Objection!’ The Nawab leaped to his feet. ‘My client was not in disguise. The defense intends to show that the person in question was not my client. Therefore, he was not in disguise.’

Judge Misra ruminated on this. In Indian courts testimony was not recorded verbatim; instead the judge edited and censored it to his personal taste.

‘Objection allowed.’ He turned to the court clerk, a Sikh in a blue and gold turban with a huge wiry beard. ‘On the 5th July, 1972 a man in a turban and dhoti came to my boarding house. He looked a little like the defendant.’

The Sikh's ancient Remington clattered to life.

Judge Misra turned to the PP. ‘Continue.’

Mohinder Singh sighed and shook his head. Things were not going well.

‘Have you seen this woman before?’

Mohinder Singh picked up a tattered brown folder. He withdrew a black and white photograph of Valentine Breton and handed it to Bedi. It was then passed around the court. People in the spectator gallery and in the press corps craned their heads for a glimpse.

‘Yes,’ Bedi said. ‘He brought this woman to the hotel.’

‘That must have impressed her,’ the Nawab smirked. His sycophants chortled on cue.

Mohinder Singh looked imploringly at Judge Misra, who still pointedly ignored him. Even he's intimidated, Mohinder Singh thought sourly.

He continued. ‘This was on the 7th of July, 1972?’

‘Yes, Sahib.’

‘What time?’

‘It was in the afternoon, Sahib. I do not know what time.’

‘And what happened?’

‘He took her up to the room. I brought them tea. He requested it.’

‘A brave man,’ the Nawab shouted. More laughter.

‘And what happened then?’

‘I did not see her again. Sahib. The next morning—’

‘Yes, yes. We'll come to that.’ Mohinder Singh paused. They had reached the part in the man's testimony that even he doubted. ‘When did the police visit you?’

Bedi mumbled and stared at the floor. Everyone strained to hear over the hammering of the rain and the shouts of two of the Nawab's junior lawyers, who were arguing heatedly between themselves.

‘When did the police visit you?’

‘I'm not sure, Sahib.’

‘After the defendant brought the girl back to the hotel?’

‘Yes, Sahib ...’

‘They showed you a picture of this man?’ Mohinder pointed to Michel.

‘Yes, Sahib ...’

‘Why didn't you tell the police the man they were looking for was staying in your house?’

Bedi looked fearfully at the judge.

‘I did not recognize him, Sahib. In the photograph he had Western clothes and his hair was very dark. It was only next morning, when he left with the girl, and I saw him without the turban …’

The old man's voice trailed off. Mohinder saw the Nawab grinning in triumph. Judge Misra turned to the court clerk. ‘The witness states that when the police showed him a photograph, he did not recognize the defendant as the same man who was renting a room from him. Continue ...’

♦ ♦ ♦

The Oberoi Hotel was one of New Delhi's premier hotels. It overlooked the golf links on one side, and Humayun's Tomb on the other. It boasted New Delhi's only skyline cocktail bar, the Skylark.

Detective-Superintendent Ravi Engineer led his guest to a table by the window and ordered two gin and tonics. Engineer and Budjinski had met many times at police conventions around the world and had become firm friends during Budjinski's two previous visits to the Indian capital on Interpol business. When Noelle had been murdered it was Engineer who had handled the case, and personally supervised the return of her body to Paris.

When Budjinski returned to India for the trial, Engineer had invited him to stay with him at his home in Delhi.

Engineer was a Brahmin, a thin ascetic man with pale skin and short, graying hair. He had been educated at Cambridge and to Budjinski he still sounded for all the world like a major in the British Army. A thin clipped moustache added to the effect.

‘Well, what do you think of Indian justice, old boy?’ he asked Budjinski in English.

Budjinski swallowed the gin. ‘It's not a trial, it's a circus.’

‘Oh, I don't know. I thought it was quite dignified in there today. Sometimes it gets quite out of hand.’

‘The prosecutor - what's he called? The PP. He's a fucking idiot.’

‘No, he's just uninspired, that's all. You must be, to do that job. It's not his fault.’

‘This could go on for months.’

‘It's possible.’ Engineer looked out of the window. In the distance, lightning swept and flickered across the night sky.

‘If they let him go, I'll kill him myself. I swear it.’

‘Oh, my goodness. No bloodshed, old fellow. Let's keep this civilized and make sure he gets hanged.’

‘I don't care how it's done.’

‘They'll convict him, René.’

‘Will they?’

‘Have another drink. And don't worry. Things will go better tomorrow.’

♦ ♦ ♦

It was the second day of the trial.

The Nawab rose slowly from his seat like a bird of prey spreading its black wings. Beneath the gown he wore an immaculately tailored black coat with grey striped trousers and white choirboy collar. He towered over the old silk merchant, and the dichotomy was obvious to everyone. Bedi, already terrified out of his wits, looked as if he was about to faint.

The Nawab examined Bedi down the length of his long, beaked nose. Then he threw out a hand and on cue one of his junior assistants placed a photograph into his palm.

‘This is the photograph that the police showed you?’ he said.

‘Yes, Sahib ...’

‘You didn't recognize my client at that time?’

Bedi seemed to be having trouble speaking. ‘No, Sahib.’

‘Why not?’

‘His clothes. His hair.’

‘What was different about his hair?’

‘It was fair. Sahib—’

‘You said he was wearing a turban.’

Bedi realized the trap he had fallen into. He looked down at his feet.

‘How many times had you seen your boarder before the police visited you?’

‘I'm not sure, Sahib ...’

‘Once? Twice? A dozen times? Three hundred times?’

Bedi was shaking head to foot. Mohinder Singh looked away. He couldn't bear to watch.

‘Perhaps a dozen times.’

‘He always wore a turban?’

‘Yes, Sahib ...’

‘But you knew the color of his hair?’ Bedi did not answer. The Nawab looked triumphantly around the room. ‘All right then, when did you in fact decide that your boarder was the man the police were looking for?’

‘The next morning, Sahib.’

‘What time was that?’

‘I'm not sure ...’

‘You got to the police station at five o’clock. You went straight there when you realized your boarder was the man the police were looking for?’

‘Yes, Sahib.’

‘But it’s dark at that time, correct?’

A nod.

‘Weren't you asleep?’

‘I woke up, Sahib. I heard him moving about on the stairs.’

‘And you recognized him immediately in the pitch dark when you failed to recognize him in broad daylight on a dozen previous occasions? Is that correct?’ Bedi did not answer. ‘I said - is that correct?’

Bedi looked to be on the point of collapse. He stared resolutely at the floor, unable to utter a word.

Mohinder waited for the Nawab to administer the mortal blow.

‘All this happened on the 8th of July, 1972. Is that correct?’ When Bedi did not answer the Nawab shouted: ‘It's in your testimony! You said the man you thought was my client took a shrouded body to the *ghats* on the 8th of July, 1972.’ He waved the tattered FIR in front of the old Hindu's face. ‘It's in here! Well?’ Bedi nodded his head. ‘Speak up! The judge can't hear you!’

‘Y-yes, Sahib ...’

‘What day is it today?’

‘I don't know,’ Bedi mumbled.

The Nawab turned to face the courtroom, glowing with triumph. ‘He doesn't know.’ He put his hands on his hips and took a step closer. ‘Your whole testimony is a pack of lies, isn't it?’ the Nawab shouted.

Bedi nodded. ‘Yes, Sahib.’

Mohinder Singh groaned and put his head in his hands.

CHAPTER 48

Budjinski sat on the balcony of Engineer's villa in old Delhi. The garden was bright with hibiscus. Mynahs patrolled the high walls and a bulbul contested the lime tree with a family of sparrows. It was a bright warm morning but on the horizon the pillars of cumulus were gathering for the afternoon storms.

A servant brought a pitcher of lemonade. Engineer grinned apologetically. ‘I'm sorry. I do not drink in front of the servants.’

Budjinski shrugged, preoccupied with his own thoughts.

Engineer was worried about him. He had lost a lot of weight. Instead of looking fitter, he just appeared gaunt and old. He no longer had the same purpose when he walked. Once René Budjinski had been a battering ram. Now he was an old stick you could break across your knee.

‘What do you make of him?’ Budjinski said suddenly.

‘It is hard to say. I leave psychology to the experts.’

‘Women still fawn over him. In court yesterday I saw a girl - a white girl, a Westerner - throw a flower to him. He's killed twenty women! It doesn't seem to matter. Women still treat him like a film star.’ He ignored the proffered lemonade. ‘Can you get me into Tihar?’

‘Why?’

‘I want to talk to him. I want to know . . . about Noelle. I have to understand, or I'm going to go insane.’

‘I'm sorry. It is beyond my power. Even if I could arrange such a thing, I would not. I will not let you do such a thing to yourself.’

‘What are you talking about?’

‘How long would you be able to just talk before you decided to put your hands round his throat? Then the police would put you in prison too.’

‘It would be worth it.’

‘I think not.’

Budjinski reached for the cigarettes in his shirt pocket and lit one. His hands were shaking. ‘Do you think he's insane?’

‘Possibly. Killing all those women … a man must be insane to do such a thing. But the robberies have a genius about them. I don’t think he’s mad, I think he is without a soul. We assume that every man has one, but I don’t think it’s true.’

‘Go on.’

‘A man without a soul can learn to be charming and attractive. These are just social skills after all. He can use his mind more efficiently than most because it is uncluttered with emotion. Yet when it comes to feeling empathy and compassion, he cannot do it. In this way, he is irredeemable.’

‘And yet he gave in to emotion, with Valentine. That is how he was caught in the end.’

‘Ah, the woman. Do you know where she is now?’

‘No,’ Budjinski said. ‘She's disappeared.’

It was the fourth day of the trial.

Mohinder Singh had called his second witness, the old *chandal* from Varanasi. He was dressed in dirty cotton pajamas, and his turban was grey with grime. He was a *harijan* and the gaggle of lawyers and their sycophants shrank back from him.

Mohinder Singh rose with great confidence. He was sure today would go much better. ‘What is your name?’

‘Ranvir Laxman.’ The man's voice was rich and deep and confident. Even though he was a from a low caste, he maintained a quiet dignity.

‘What is your occupation?’

‘I am a *chandal* at the Hari Schandra *ghat*, Sahib.’

As with Bedi, Mohinder led the man through a string of routine biographical questions to put him at his ease and establish a rhythm. Then he pointed to Michel. ‘Have you seen this man before?’

Laxman turned his head slowly and looked at Michel. Michel met his eyes. ‘Yes, Sahib ...’

‘When did you see him?’

‘It was the day before he tried to kill the woman.’

The Nawab had been lounging on a wooden bench, like a Roman senator at an orgy. He sprang to his feet as if he had been stung. ‘Objection!’

The judge nodded. ‘Allowed.’

Mohinder Singh nodded quickly. ‘The day before the crime was committed. The 7th of July, 1972. Is that correct?’

Laxman nodded. ‘Yes, Sahib.’

‘And why did he come to see you?’

‘He said his wife had died. He wanted her body to be burned on the *ghats* and her ashes spread in the Mother Ganges.’

‘You didn't think this was strange? Such a request from a European?’

‘I did not know he was European. He wore a turban and dhoti. I thought he was Hindu.’

The Nawab jumped to his feet. ‘Objection! The defense maintains that the man the witness is referring to was a Hindu.’

‘Allowed.’

The PP pressed on. ‘So the arrangements were made?’

‘Yes, Sahib.’

‘And when did you next see him?’

‘The next morning, Sahib. He brought the woman. She was wrapped in a white sheet. He carried her down the steps in his arms. I saw nothing amiss.’

‘Then what happened?’

Laxman looked at Michel, hawked some phlegm from deep in his throat and spat squarely between his feet. The surrounding lawyers craned their necks to stare at the betel-colored blob of spittle as if it were a new exhibit.

‘The witness will refrain from expectorating in court,’ the judge said.

‘Then what happened?’ Mohinder Singh asked him.

‘He laid her on the pallet and the fire was lit. It was then that the sheet fell away and I saw her face. Her lips moved. I realized she was still alive.’

‘Did you then try and rescue the woman?’

‘Yes, Sahib.’

‘And did the defendant then step in to prevent you from removing her from the pallet?’

‘He threatened me with a knife. So I ran to get help.’

‘And it was at this point that the police arrived?’

‘Yes, Sahib.’

‘Thank you. Your witness.’

♦ ♦ ♦

The Nawab rose imperiously from his perch below the judge's bench and walked towards the press gallery. He stood a moment in profile, for the

benefit of the court reporters who were hastily making sketches. Then he turned to Laxman.

‘You are sure my client is the man you saw that morning at the *ghats*?’

‘Yes, Sahib.’

‘Exactly like him?’

‘No, not exactly. He was wearing a turban and dhoti and—’

‘So he looked quite different then?’

Laxman was not sure how to answer. Judge Misra turned to the court stenographer. ‘The witness said the man he saw on the day before the crime was quite different from the defendant.’

The Remington clattered into life.

‘Continue,’ Judge Misra said.

Mohinder Singh shook his head.

The Nawab pressed on, encouraged. ‘How many Hindus come to you each year for your services?’

‘I do not know, Sahib.’

‘Hundreds?’

‘Very many.’

‘Very many. And you remember one unremarkable looking man in a dhoti.’

‘You never forget any man who threatens you with a knife.’

‘Ah, I see,’ the Nawab said, and he frowned, seemingly making a gigantic effort at understanding. ‘So what you're telling me is you only remember him from the next morning. When this incident took place.’

Laxman hesitated, uncertain now.

‘Yes,’ Laxman said.

‘What time was this?’

‘Dawn, Sahib.’

‘Dawn. So it was dark?’

‘Yes, Sahib but—’

‘So you are saying that you think my client was the man you saw that morning on the *ghat* from your memory of an incident that happened in the dark over twelve months ago?’

‘I am certain this is the man.’

‘But you have already told us that this crime happened before the sun came up. You must have extraordinary eyesight.’ The Nawab turned away

and pointed to the wall clock that hung on the wall above the court entrance. ‘What time is it?’

Laxman squinted across the room. ‘I ... I don't know.’

‘It's a quarter to one. And the clock is only twenty-five yards away. Your eyesight certainly is extraordinary. Extraordinarily deficient. No further questions.’

♦ ♦ ♦

‘I call Andrew Rosen.’

The American slouched into the courtroom, his lank fair hair down to his shoulders, a thin beard covering his face. He had lost weight during his long stays in Indian prisons and the frayed white cotton shirt hung loose on his shoulders.

As he took his place in the courtroom he tried to avoid Michel's eyes.

Mohinder Singh put on his spectacles and consulted his trial notes.

‘What is your name?’

‘Andrew Rosen.’

‘What is your nationality?’

‘American.’

‘You are from the United States?’

‘Yeah.’

‘And your occupation?’

‘I'm a student.’

‘Hah!’ The Nawab removed a piece of lint from his jacket and dropped it at the witness’s feet. Mohinder ignored the interruption, having learned by now that he would get no assistance from the judge.

He pointed to Michel. ‘Look at this man.’

Andy forced himself to turn around. Michel leaned towards him: ‘I'm going to cut off your balls and stuff them down your throat,’ he whispered.

‘Do you recognize him?’

Andy struggled to find his voice. They had promised they would release him if he testified. He could not go through another five years in Tihar. He had to do this.

‘I said, do you recognize him?’

‘Yes.’

‘Where have you seen him before?’

‘In Bombay. We shared a cell.’

‘You were cell mates in the Port of Bombay prison, is that correct?’

‘Yeah.’

‘Can you tell us what you remember about him?’

‘Well, he was pretty . . . violent. He killed this guy. A Canadian.’

‘He killed someone?’

The Nawab rose, spreading his gown like a pair of giant wings. ‘Objection!’

‘Well, I didn't see him do it. It was just a rumor going around the prison. They said he'd cornered a guy in the latrines and smashed his head on a concrete block.’

‘What else do you remember about the prisoner?’

‘Well, he was pretty anxious to get out of the prison.’

‘Was there any particular reason?’

‘Yeah. He said he had a score to settle, with his old man.’

‘His old man?’

‘His father. He said he was going to kill him.’

Mohinder Singh hooked his thumbs into the pockets of his waistcoat, feeling confident now. The Nawab half rose from his chair and thought better of it.

‘When did you last see him?’

‘Just before … he …’

‘Speak up.’

‘Just before he escaped.’

‘Just before he escaped. Is that what you said?’

‘Yeah.’

‘So this man is an escaped convict?’

‘They didn't convict him of anything, man ...’

‘And when did the prisoner make his escape from Bombay jail?’

‘It was January, 1968.’

‘Thank you. Your witness.’

The Nawab seemed to have fallen asleep. After a few moments he yawned theatrically, stretching out his arms and legs and then rising slowly to his feet as if the effort was all too great. He regarded Andy Rosen for long moments as if he were something he had just found beneath a rock.

‘How old are you?’

‘Twenty-three, man.’

‘Twenty-three. Have you ever worked?’

‘What?’

‘I said, have you ever worked? Had a job?’

‘I told you, I'm a student.’

‘What did he say?’ Judge Misra said, craning forward.

‘He said he is twenty-three years old and has never done a day's work in his life,’ the Nawab interpreted.

Judge Misra repeated this verbatim to the court stenographer.

‘What is your present occupation?’

‘Jesus, man, what is this?’ Andy appealed to the PP, who shrugged helplessly.

‘Do you have a present occupation?’

‘You know I don't man. I'm in Tihar.’

‘You are in prison here in Delhi.’

‘Yeah.’

‘For what offence?’

‘I got busted for possession.’

Judge Misra frowned and looked at the Nawab.

‘He was arrested for possessing hard drugs.’

‘They weren't hard drugs, man. It was only a few fuckin' Buddha sticks.’

‘The witness was arrested for supplying heroin,’ Judge Misra dictated to the stenographer.

‘How long have you been in prison here in Delhi?’

‘Two years.’

‘And you have five more years to serve.’

‘Yeah.’

‘And before that you were in prison in Bombay.’

‘That was only for a couple of months. I went back to the States after that.’

‘And when you came back to India you were again arrested for drug-taking?’

‘Yeah, I got bad karma.’

‘How long have you been taking drugs?’

‘I don't know, man. Since I was fifteen or sixteen, I guess.’

‘Since when?’ Judge Misra asked.

‘Since he was a small child, your honor,’ the Nawab explained. He turned back to the young American. ‘So you are an habitual drug user?’

‘Isn't everyone?’

‘And do you frequently experience hallucinations?’

‘No, man, I don't hallucinate. What is this?’

‘So why do you take drugs?’

‘It's a good trip. Makes you feel good. Makes the world a nicer place, you know?’

‘So you take drugs because it changes your perception of the world?’

‘Yeah, I guess.’

‘So being an habitual drug user you tend to see things that other people cannot see?’

‘Hey look, man, that's not what I said …’

‘You were pressured by the police to become an approver in this case. Is that not correct?’

That much was true. There wasn’t any other way out. His father had refused to help him anymore. He had made that clear enough. You're a stain on my reputation and a leech on your family. It's time you learned your lesson. That was two years ago. It might as well have been two hundred.

He could not go through another five years in Tihar.

‘No, they didn't pressure me.’

The Nawab smiled. ‘Really? Describe to me what Tihar prison is like.’

Andy was thrown by the sudden switch. ‘It's a shithole.’

‘I beg your pardon?’

‘It's hell, man.’

‘What do they feed you?’

‘You get a chapati and half a cup of milk once a day. And maybe some dahl. If you don't have any money you starve. The guards make you pay for everything.’

‘And are your quarters comfortable?’

‘I sleep on a stone floor with one lousy blanket, winter and summer. There's rats everywhere.’ Andy felt tears welling up. His control was going. ‘It's shit, man. You couldn't understand just how bad it is.’

‘I imagine a person would do anything to get themselves out of such a place.’

‘I'd sell my own mother if—’ Andy stopped. He looked at the PP but the little Indian was staring at the floor.

‘How fortunate you did not have to go that far,’ the Nawab said. ‘This man doesn't even appear to be a distant relative. No further questions.’

CHAPTER 49

It was the fifth day of the trial.

It was not going well. The Nawab had lived up to his reputation, somehow maneuvering and bullying the prosecution witnesses so that by the time he had finished with them hard evidence had become mere speculation, fantasy or imagination.

Budjinski sat in the court day after day, feeling an impotent fury building inside him. The bastard looked as if he was going to get away with it.

Something had to happen.

♦ ♦ ♦

Mohinder Singh had his office in an ancient building next to the Parliament Street courts. Budjinski walked past doors proclaiming ‘V.S. Subramanian, BA (Oxford) LLB Advocate, High Court’, and ‘D.K. Chandrasekhar Advocate. Oath Commissioner. Ex-Prosecuting Deputy Supt. Police. Decorations: President's Medal, Police & Fire Services Medal.’

The catacomb of musty offices was filled with a phalanx of stenographers in bright-colored saris, the corridors crowded with white pajama-ed messengers clutching files. Coolies piggybacked lawyers into the entrance hall, to save them getting their shoes wet in the rain-deep streets.

Mohinder Singh's office was on the third floor. The sign on the door said simply ‘Mohinder Singh, Public Prosecutor.’ The door was half open and the PP was at his desk, bent over some papers. His pale blue turban was slightly awry. He was painstakingly sharpening the point of his pencil.

Budjinski pushed the door open and walked in.

‘Mr. Singh,’ he said.

The PP did not seem surprised to see him. He waved airily to a wooden chair. ‘Sit down, Sir.’ He did not get up and continued about his business.

Budjinski sat down and looked around. The office was cramped, with law books and files crammed on to shelves on every wall.

‘What can I do for you, Sir?’

Budjinski said in English: ‘I want to know when you're going to call me to the stand.’

‘All in good time, sir, all in good time.’

‘Let me be blunt.’ Budjinski leaned forward and tapped the edge of the table with his forefinger to emphasize his point. ‘We're losing this case.’

‘'We', sir?’

‘Look, I've been a cop all my life. I've seen a lot of criminal trials. I know when a case is getting fucked up.’

‘Fucked up. I'm not familiar with that term. Is it French?’

‘The fish is wriggling off the hook, Mr. Singh. Every day I sit in that courtroom watching this farce and I can't believe what is happening. That man is a thief and a murderer and a sadist and you're letting that smart-arse lawyer run rings round you.’

‘You think your testimony will turn the tide then?’

‘Yes, I think it will.’

‘I see. Tell me something, sir, I hear you were recently dismissed from your employment. You were a captain in the International Police Commission, yes?’

‘Interpol. And I wasn't dismissed. It was early retirement. Health reasons.’

‘I see you are still defensive about it, so I won’t labor the point. But if I, a plodding little public prosecutor, can elicit such a response from you, how will you stand up to my brilliant colleague, the Nawab?’

Budjinski leaned back in his chair, defeated. ‘I am sorry. It's just that my daughter ...’

‘I know that I cannot match the courtroom antics of my illustrious colleague. But do not despair just yet, Sir. I still have an ace up my sleeve.’

‘Something that’s not in the FIR?’

‘Perhaps. You will see.’

♦ ♦ ♦

Budjinski listened to the rain falling on the banana palms. He scratched irritably at the prickly heat that had blossomed under his arms and on his back. Beyond the garden wall, the street was awash with the sudden deluge. He watched a man tuck up his dhoti and wade across the street, holding a black umbrella over his head with his other hand.

The weather seemed to match his spirits.

He pushed away the bowl of sweet black-rice porridge and stared at the grey sheets of rain: He thought again of Noelle and the rage boiled up inside him again. It was all so bloody hopeless.

‘Good morning, René.’

He looked up. It was Engineer, grey, cool and dignified in an open-necked shirt and muted grey trousers. ‘*Bonjour,* Ravi.’

‘Seen this?’ Engineer threw a copy of that morning's Times of India on the table in front of him. Budjinski picked it up.

‘What is it?’

‘Front page. Read it.’

VALENTINE BRETON TO RETURN FOR TRIAL

‘They found her.’

Engineer sat down and poured himself some tea. ‘According to the story, she came to them. The Indians gave up on her months ago.’

‘I don't believe it.’

‘Neither do I.’ He folded a napkin on his lap. ‘Neither will the Nawab. Let's see if he can convince the judge that a woman doesn't recognize the man who tried to kill her.’ He took a slice of papaya from the plate on the table and picked up his fork. ‘Good news always gives me an appetite.’

CHAPTER 50

Valentine Breton had been taken initially to the general infirmary in Varanasi. But the next day Budjinski arranged for her to be flown to Delhi, and then back to Paris. He had paid for this out of his own pocket. For two weeks she had clung to life in the burns unit at the Hôpital des Invalides.

She had second- and third-degree burns to the left side of her face, her left arm and shoulder, and the back of her left leg. The doctors ordered four-hourly intramuscular tetracycline to stave off the streptococcal infection that would otherwise have killed her.

For the first couple of weeks she had floated on a soft cushion of analgesics, which protected her from the worst of the pain. When the drugs were stopped, and Valentine regained full consciousness, she would not speak to anyone. She did not utter a word to Budjinski, to the doctors, to any of the nurses, or to her friends.

A psychologist said it was post-traumatic stress.

Budjinski continued to visit her in the hospital but she showed no sign of recognition. He feared her psyche had been destroyed by what had happened to her.

Three months later Valentine Breton discharged herself from hospital and disappeared. The Indian authorities had hoped to secure a full and damning statement from her. They had been forced to press on with their case against Michel Christian without her.

There were rumors; she had been admitted to a private psychiatric clinic; she had gone to live with a distant relative in the remote Dordogne; she had been seen at a remote Buddhist monastery in Nepal.

Now she was coming back to India. Budjinski wanted desperately to see her again.

He wanted to ask her to forgive him.

♦ ♦ ♦

Budjinski arrived at the court room at twenty minutes before noon. Beggars slept on benches, naked babies wailed on the floors, lawyers jostled among the crowds of beggars and desperate-looking men clutching thick sheaves of legal documents clamored for the attention of any official

who would listen to them. Occasionally a raven flew in through an open window and flapped, panicked, over the heads of the jostling, idiot crowd like a harbinger of madness.

He found his seat among the section set aside for the Press and waited. He heard Michel before he saw him, he was preceded by the clank of heavy boots and chains and then a phalanx of guards appeared at the entrance, surrounding him with a wall of khaki. When he saw Budjinski he gave him a mocking smile.

Budjinski looked away.

When he turned back Michel was whispering to the young American writer who was crouched beside him, writing hurriedly into a notebook. There were rumors that the contract with the New York publisher for his life story was worth fifty thousand dollars.

‘He's gorgeous, isn't he?’

Budjinski turned around. There were two young girls in the row of chairs behind him, in Western T-shirts and jeans. Their eyes, bright with excitement, were fixed on Michel.

‘He's a cold-blooded killer,’ Budjinski said.

‘He's innocent,’ one of them said.

Budjinski turned his back on them. Michel had noticed the two girls now and was smiling at them. They gasped and fluttered. ‘He's beautiful,’ he heard one of them say. ‘He couldn't have done it!’

‘The prosecution calls Valentine Breton.’

For the first time in a week, a hush fell over the courtroom. Even the circus of lawyers fell silent as they, like the sweating gaggle of spectators and reporters, craned their necks for a glimpse of the woman of whom they had heard and read so much.

She walked in wearing a pure white sari, stitched with gold. Her head and face were covered, in the style of the Moslem *chauderei*. She was ushered into the court, protected by half a dozen khaki-clad soldiers, who helped her force a way through the press.

Budjinski craned his neck for a glimpse of her. She was led towards the bench, to the place reserved for her among the tight press of lawyers. Even the Nawab was on his feet, staring with frank curiosity.

Mohinder Singh waited, impassive.

Budjinski wiped the perspiration from his face. Valentine had her back to him now, was lost among the jostling crowd of reporters and lawyers.

Everyone waited. The only sound in the room was the hum of the electric fans.

This was a rare event in an Indian courtroom. The witness had not previously made a statement in the FIR and what she would say was unknown to anyone except the PP.

Mohinder Singh came to stand next to her. He whispered something to her, then said aloud: ‘Please tell us your name.’

Valentine removed her veil. There was an audible gasp from the men around her. Budjinski felt a stab of agony. How much of her beauty had been saved?

Then, unexpectedly, Valentine turned her head. Almost as if she were looking for someone. Me perhaps, Budjinski thought.

‘Oh God,’ he murmured.

One side of her face was as he remembered it; perfect. But the other ... the other was raw with the fresh scar tissue that blurred the lines of her nose and lips and cheek. It was as if a sculptor had fashioned the head of a goddess from wax, but left his work of art too close to a flame so that half the face had melted away. It was part perfection, part horror.

Budjinski felt a part of himself bleed and die.

This is my fault.

Then she turned back to the PP.

‘Please tell us your name,’ he repeated.

‘Valentine Breton.’

‘How old are you, Miss Breton?’

‘Twenty-one.’

‘And your nationality?’

‘French.’

Budjinski concentrated on the cadence of the voices, Mohinder's monotone, Valentine's lilting accent, repeating the usual formalities.

Then: ‘How long have you known the defendant?’

‘I met him about eighteen months ago, in Paris.’

‘And what was your relationship to this man?’

Valentine looked down at Michel for the first time. They were close enough to touch. Michel's eyes were half closed, his head lolling back in an attitude of arrogant passivity, as if he were listening to a young child reading a story.

‘We were lovers.’

‘Is it not true that when you were with the defendant in Bangkok, you were approached by a Captain René Budjinski from Interpol and asked to stay in contact with the accused as he was under suspicion for a series of murders?’

The Nawab leaped to his feet. ‘Objection!’

Judge Misra leaned forward. ‘Is this pertinent, PP?’

‘Yes, your honor. It is to establish the motive for the crime.’

‘Objection overruled.’

The Nawab sank back into his seat, his face turned in exasperation to the gods.

‘I was told Michel was under suspicion,’ Valentine answered.

‘And so you followed him to Varanasi at the request of Captain Budjinski?’

‘No. I would have gone anyway.’

The PP shrugged this elaboration away. ‘And what happened when you arrived in Varanasi?’

‘There was a note at my hotel. From Michel. He wanted me to meet him the next day.’

‘And Captain Budjinski advised you to make this rendezvous?’

‘Yes. But, as I said, I would have gone anyway.’

‘Did you know the police were intending to arrest him? That a warrant for his arrest had been issued in connection with—’ Mohinder bent to examine his notes.

‘Yes, I knew that. I warned him.’

Mohinder was startled. ‘You warned him?’

‘The police were harassing him. I believed he was innocent. When I saw him, I shouted to him that we were being watched and that we should get away as quickly as possible.’

Mohinder fumbled in the pocket of his jacket for his handkerchief. He mopped the perspiration from his forehead and resettled the spectacles on his nose. ‘Then he took you to the boarding house owned by Mr. Bedi.’

‘That is correct.’

‘This is where he drugged you.’

The Nawab was on his feet again, alert now, sensing blood. ‘Objection! The PP is leading the witness!’

‘Allowed.’

Mohinder scowled, rattled. ‘Can you tell us in your own words what happened at the boarding house?’

‘Michel and I decided that it would be best if he got out of Varanasi immediately.’

Budjinski could not see Valentine's face but he could see the PP. The little Sikh was perspiring freely now. He had begun to falter. ‘You decided he should leave?’

‘Yes. I decided to stay behind. He had a better chance of escaping on his own.’

‘Why are you lying?’

‘I'm not lying!’

The Nawab leaned back against the judge's bench and clapped his hands in silent applause, mouthing: ‘Bravo!’

‘Please tell us what happened then.’

‘Someone broke into my room.’

‘Who?’

‘I don't know.’

‘You're lying!’

The Nawab leaped to his feet. ‘The PP is badgering his own witness!’

Judge Misra was astonished. The counsel for the defense now seemed to be protecting a prosecution witness. He turned to Mohinder. ‘Objection allowed.’

‘What happened when this … this unknown person broke into your room?’

‘He put a cloth over my mouth. There was a strong smell, so I imagine there was some chemical on the cloth. Chloroform perhaps. That's all I can remember. I must have passed out. The next thing I remember was waking up at the *ghats*. The man was carrying me down to the water's edge.’

‘It was this man!’ Mohinder shouted, pointing at Michel.

‘No.’ Valentine said, perfectly calm. ‘No, I told you, the man who did was holding me in his arms. I got a good look at his face. He was an Indian. It wasn't Michel. It was someone else. Michel wouldn't do that to me. He loved me. He's innocent.’

The courtroom exploded. The prosecution’s case had just been shredded by the victim of the crime. The trial was over.

Michel Christian would go free.

The reporters dashed for the door. The Nawab leaped to his feet and started to pound Valentine on the back. ‘Well done! Well done!’ he was shouting. ‘Justice has been done today!’

Budjinski tried to reach her but her frail, white-clad figure was lost among the crowd of lawyers and soldiers. The PP was shouting ‘She's lying! She's lying!’

Michel was the only one in the courtroom who had not moved. He sat perfectly still in his chains. He was laughing.

Budjinski fought his way out of the courtroom.

Valentine! Why?

Why?

♦ ♦ ♦

The black and yellow Ambassador pulled up in the street outside. Budjinski watched her arrival from the balcony. The slender figure in the white sari got out of the car, hurried through the garden to the *porte cochère*.

‘Kapil will show her up,’ Engineer said. ‘I'll leave you alone, shall I, old chap?’

‘Thanks,’ Budjinski said.

Engineer left. A few moments later the door opened and Kapil ushered Valentine into the room.

Kapil bowed and shut the door behind him.

‘Captain Budjinski.’

He took a step towards her, uncertain what to do, how to greet her. ‘Hello, Valentine. Please sit down.’

‘Merci.’ She chose one of the cane armchairs, her eyes watching him from behind the gossamer veil. There was a silver teapot on the carved mahogany table. Budjinski poured two cups of unsweetened tea.

‘I didn't think I'd ever see you again. After you left the hospital—’

‘I could not stay in France. There's a place Michel took me to, once. It is in Nepal. I went there.’

‘I see.’

She took the cup from him. ‘How have you been?’

‘All right. Thanks for coming.’

‘I heard you wanted to see me.’

‘Of course.’

‘You want to know why I did it.’

She couldn't still love him, he thought. Not after what he did to her.

‘Yes.’

‘I’m sorry, René. I can’t tell you that. Perhaps one day.’

It wasn’t the answer he was looking for. He thought about the journalist taking down his story in the courtroom, the two girls who had been sitting behind him in the court flirting with the bastard. ‘Just tell me that you don’t still love him.’

‘As I said René, there are some things that it’s better not to know right now.’

‘He’s not getting out of there, you know. There's extradition orders from Singapore and the Philippines. And if they don't get him, I'll finish that bastard myself.’

‘Please, Captain—’

‘I'm not a captain any more. They kicked me out.’

‘I'm sorry.’

‘Don't be. I did what I had to do.’ Budjinski lit a cigarette. ‘I've been meaning to give these up. Noelle always used to nag me about it. But there really hasn’t been a good time to do it in the last twelve months.’

‘Perhaps now?’

‘No, this doesn't seem like a good time either.’ They sat in embarrassed silence while Valentine sipped her tea.

‘Is that the only reason you wanted to see me?’

Budjinski got up and went to stand on the balcony. ‘Look, I don't know how to say this … but … what happened to you ...’

‘You want absolution?’

‘I was never a very good Catholic, Valentine. I just wanted you to know I was sorry. It was all my fault. It will haunt me till the day I die.’

‘You know, when I was in Nepal the monks there tried to explain to me about this thing called karma. It is like a debt that must be paid. Sometimes it is our debt, sometimes it is a debt from another lifetime. It can even be a debt we inherit from our parents. Whatever debt there is, I have now paid mine.’ She stood up and put a hand on his shoulder. ‘Don’t torment yourself. What I did was my decision, and my destiny. If I had not gone after him in Varanasi, he would have followed me back to France. He told me once that our destinies were entwined. He was right.’

‘Just say you forgive me.’

‘There’s nothing to forgive. I never blamed you in the first place.’ She turned and went to the door. ‘Au revoir, Captain.’

‘Where will you go now?’

‘I don't know. That depends on what happens to Michel.’

‘By the way ... did you know the Paris police have reopened the file on your father's death?’

Valentine seemed to sway on her feet. For a moment Budjinski thought she was going to faint. He moved to help her, but she held up her hand. ‘I'm all right.’

‘I thought you ought to know.’

‘Michel?’

He nodded. ‘Can you still love him now?’

‘I cannot ever explain to you what I feel for Michel,’ she said.

The door closed gently behind her. The taxi cab was still waiting for her in the street. He wondered if he would ever see her again.

CHAPTER 51

Michel was ushered into the empty cell. A guard pushed him on to a bench in the middle of the room. They had chained him in the *dandaberi* again so that he could receive his visitor. For the past year he had lived and slept in a cramped cell, three paces wide and five deep, on a starvation diet. Each day he received one chapati, a half cup of soured milk, a dish of watery green dahl, and some mashed bean soup. He had been allowed no visitors, no radio, no newspapers. He slept on a hard stone floor with just a greasy woolen blanket to cover him, enduring by day the moans and babbles of those driven insane by their incarceration; and by night coping with the ravages of hordes of large black rats.

A rusty pipe jutted from one wall, and brownish water occasionally belched from it. But it was the only water he had so he cupped his hands for this meager and infrequent offering, whatever hour of the day or night.

His cell flooded during the monsoon.

His legs and wrists were raw and festering from the scraping of the steel manacles that he was made to wear whenever they took him from his cell. His body was covered in sores where lice and flea bites had become infected.

Privately, he had hoped the court would convict him. They would sentence him to seven years, perhaps ten, it didn't matter. Meanwhile he would have received the advance on the ridiculous book the American publisher wanted him to write and with that he could buy his way out of Tihar.

But if he was extradited to Singapore or even Thailand might convene a quick trial and execute him before he had the chance to plan a way out.

He needed a miracle.

The door opened, and Valentine entered, flanked by two guards. She sat down at the table opposite him.

She drew back her veil. She regarded him coolly, though the left eye stared from a shapeless putty of scar tissue. One side of her mouth was frozen with scar tissue, the other curled in a smile of regret.

‘Hello Michel,’ she said in English.

‘You're the last person I expected to see.’

‘Why? There's a bond between you and me, *chèri*. You said that yourself.’

‘Have you come to gloat?’

‘No. I've come ... to say I'm sorry.’

‘For Bangkok? Or for yesterday?’

‘Yesterday? But ... I helped you. I saved you.’

‘Saved me? For what? For the Thais?’

‘The Thais?’

‘I'm to be extradited.’

She switched quickly from English to French, so the guards would not understand. ‘It's all right. That's why I came. I have a plan.’

Michel blinked. ‘Go on.’

‘It's my fault you're here. So it's up to me to get you out.’

‘How?’

‘I can get you a uniform and a disguise. And some money to bribe the guards. I will pay one of the guards to bring it into Tihar. Then you can walk out.’

‘You're crazy.’

‘Am I? The warden here earns three hundred rupees a month. How much do you think it will cost to make it all sound a little less crazy?’

‘You can organize all this?’

‘Of course.’

‘What happens when ... if I get outside the walls?’

‘I'll be waiting near the front gate. I'll have transport and we'll drive straight to the Nepalese border at Raxaul. I’ll hide you in the back until we get out of the city.’

‘When?’

‘Tomorrow night.’

‘What time?’

‘Eleven o'clock. No one will know you are gone till the next morning. From Nepal we will fly to South America. I've arranged it all - a passport, new clothes, everything. In two days you will be safe, and we can start our life again.’

Her eyes were bright, like a small child hoping for his approval.

‘I've underestimated you,’ Michel said.

‘Time is up,’ one of the guards said.

Valentine stood up to leave.

‘Why are you doing this?’ Michel asked her.

‘You don't know?’

‘I thought you hated me.’

‘I did. For a long time, when I was in the hospital, all I did was dream of a thousand different ways for you to die. But then I realized that if I killed you, I'd be killing a part of myself. I want you, Michel. I want you back.’

The door shut behind her.

Michel stared after her. My God. She actually thinks I'd take her back. After all she's done. And looking like that. He shuddered at the thought of making love to such a horror. It was a pity she had not died that morning in Varanasi.

Now he would have to kill her all over again.

♦ ♦ ♦

Valentine made her way to the Chandni Chowk, the famous flea bazaar between the Jama Masjid mosque and the Red Fort, a maze of covered arcades and winding alleys where you could buy anything from parts for a 1956 Austin Healey to ammunition for a .38 Smith and Wesson revolver. Small green snakes were charmed from brass spittoons and sacred cows ambled past the painted doors of tiny shops. There was a pervading fug of spice and excrement.

She purchased a khaki uniform, gold braid, a wig, a false beard and the khaki turban separately. She found military insignia, ribbons and medals in a small jewelry shop near the Jama Masjid. It was the last item on her list that caused her most trouble.

She finally found what she was looking for in a crumbling haveli at the end of a deserted alleyway. The purchase was an expensive one and impossible to carry. She would have to collect it later.

The van was obtained at considerably less expense from a gold-toothed Jain. Valentine guessed that it was stolen. It was of no importance. It would only be required for a few hours.

Finally everything was ready. She paid five hundred rupees to one of the guards at the Tihar to have the cardboard box delivered to Michel in his cell.

Soon he would be free. She could barely contain her excitement.

♦ ♦ ♦

The guard unlocked the door and pushed Andy Rosen inside. It slammed shut again behind him.

The only light came from the kerosene lantern that hung on the wall outside the barred window. Michel lay slumped in the corner, sleeping.

Andy crept towards him.

‘Michel!’

There was no answer. He moved closer.

‘Michel!’

There was a blur of movement and Andy found himself on his back, Michel's elbow pressed on his throat. ‘How do you want me to kill you? Shall I snap your neck or choke you slowly with my fingers?’

Andy tore desperately at the arm that was choking him.

‘No, please … got something …woman ...’

Suddenly he could breathe again. Michel grabbed his hair and jerked his head up from the floor. ‘Talk.’

‘One of the guards … gave me something from the woman … Valentine ... a box.’

‘Where is it?’

Andy scrabbled on the floor in the darkness. He pushed it towards him. ‘I haven't opened it. I swear.’

Michel tore open the string bindings in the tiny square of yellow light under the window. He sorted through the contents. There was everything Valentine had promised. Even a cheap watch.

There was a note scribbled in Valentine's hand: ‘Main gate. Eleven o'clock. Listen for horn. One long, two short.’

‘Michel, I'm sorry about what happened in court,’ Andy said somewhere in the darkness, ‘I had to do it. I can't take any more in here. Anyway, I knew you'd find a way out.’

Michel didn't answer.

‘I did okay, huh? I told the woman I'd get these things to you.’

Michel's fist came out of the shadows and sent Andy sprawling across the cell.

‘Get out.’

Andy shrieked for the guard. The cell door slammed behind him.

♦ ♦ ♦

Michel checked the time on the watch that Valentine had smuggled in. At ten minutes to eleven he slipped out of his filthy white T-shirt and jeans and put on the khaki tunic and shorts.

They had a curious smell. Michel wondered where Valentine had found them. Down some stinking bazaar, probably.

He emptied the rest of the contents and grinned. There was even a little glue to fit the wig and the beard. She had thought of everything. He put on the turban, fitting the elastic strap tight under his chin and then the khaki puttees and sandals.

He was ready.

He waited.

A few minutes later, he heard it. A car horn. One long blast, followed by two short ones. It was his signal.

Michel yelled for the guard to fetch the chief head warden. When they were alone in the cell he gave him the twenty thousand rupees that Valentine had wrapped in the uniform jacket at the bottom of the box.

The warden had been suitably impressed. The money was equivalent to almost six years' pay. ‘Come with me,’ he said.

He led him outside to the exercise yard. It was quiet. A heavy moon hung low over the prison walls, fat and yellow. Michel placed the military swagger stick under one arm. A nice touch that, he thought.

Now to brazen it out.

He marched across the compound, tapping the swagger stick against his thigh. Two guards lounged by the inner gate, silhouetted by an oil-lamp. They snatched up their rifles and saluted when they saw him.

Michel barked in Hindi: ‘Open the gate! Come on. Hurry it up!’

One of them fumbled with a set of keys and the iron gate creaked open. Michel waited. He didn't want to appear to be in too much of a hurry.

He grabbed the other guard, snatched his rifle away and made a show of examining the it under the light. Then he slammed it back into the startled soldier's arms.

‘This rifle's filthy. Clean it!’

‘Yes, Sahib.’

He marched out

It was all so easy. So very, very easy.

♦ ♦ ♦

There was another compound between the inner and outer walls. A stone archway housed the main gates, which were iron-studded and massive, each forty feet high and ten feet across. They were rarely opened. A small door had been cut into one of the larger ones, and it was through here that new prisoners were brought in and - more rarely - released.

A single guard lounged in the shadows. Michel spotted the glow of his cigarette.

‘Attention!’ he bellowed.

The man gasped and dropped the cigarette. His rifle clattered to the ground. He scrambled to retrieve it.

‘What's your name?’ Michel barked.

‘Corporal Shastri,’ the man stammered.

‘Report to the warden's office first thing in the morning. You are a disgrace to your uniform! Now open this gate!’ The guard did as he was told. Michel walked through.

A moment later he heard the door slam behind him.

He had done it.

He was free.

He looked along the deserted street. The van was parked about fifty yards away. It flashed its headlights at him. He ran towards it, spinning the swagger stick into the air in triumph. It clattered into the gutter.

The van was similar to the jungle green bus he had ridden each day to the Tis Hizari courthouse, an ancient Bedford, with no windows. Valentine jumped out and stood by the rear door, holding it open for him.

‘Quick!’ she hissed at him. ‘Inside!’

He leapt in, heard her slam the door shut behind him. He ripped off the fake beard and started to laugh.

♦ ♦ ♦

‘Are you going back to Paris now?’ Engineer asked.

‘Not until he's dead.’

Engineer poured the rest of the beer into Budjinski's glass. ‘They won't let him go. He'll be extradited in the next couple of days.’

‘I just can't believe it. How could she still love him?’

‘A lot simpler in our country, old boy. We generally don't let women have their own way in things. Except Indira, of course.’

‘I wonder what Noelle would say if she was here. Perhaps she'd forgive him too: 'Oh, let him be, Papa. He didn't mean to kill me. He's just got a little too excited.' Perhaps I'm the only one who really cares about what he's done. Do you think so, Ravi?’

‘I would never attempt to understand a woman’s thoughts. But I cannot help thinking it is a great shame about that girl. She must have been very beautiful once.’

‘Yes,’ Budjinski agreed. ‘She was.’

CHAPTER 52

The van lurched through the old Delhi traffic, there was the usual din of taxis and trucks and motor rickshaws even at this time of night. You're a genius, *chèrie*, he thought. It's a pity you’re not beautiful anymore.

I'll have to kill you.

He heard something move in the darkness. It was pitch-black back here and he couldn’t see. There it was again, a slithering, rustling noise, like something heavy and very wet dragging itself across the metal floor.

‘Who's there?’ Michel said.

He panicked and reached for the back door, looking for a handle. There wasn't one. He pushed against the door. Locked.

He heard the slithering noise again, and he threw himself into the corner, making himself as small a target as possible.

What the hell was that?

‘Valentine!’

Don't panic. She wouldn’t do anything to you, she just got you out of Tihar, for God's sake. He crawled to the front of the van and beat his fist against the metal partition that separated him from the driver's cabin.

‘Valentine!’

That noise again. It was getting closer.

He threw himself away from it, his body hammering into the other corner of the van. *Merde alors!* Whatever it was, it was stalking him.

He beat his fist against the side of the van again. Valentine must have heard him by now.

‘I want you, Michel. I want you back.’ She loved him, she needed him, that was why she had refused to testify against him.

‘Valentine! Stop the van!’

Why didn't she answer him?

‘VALENTINE!’

♦ ♦ ♦

The serpent had been taken in Burma. It was a reticulate python, one of the largest of the python family, thirty feet of thick sinuous coils. Normally it was timid of man.

It could not see Michel. It was the heat-sensitive organs in its facial pits that sensed him first, and then the darting tongue picked up the scent particles of the pork grease that had been smeared on the tunic. Pigs were a favorite prey. It moved in to attack.

Its hunger was excited by the strong vibrations that it picked up through the metal floor of the van. The sounds were transmitted to its ear drum through the huge bone of its lower jaw and it knew that its quarry was helpless and terrified.

Its massive jaws opened, revealing over a hundred needle-sharp teeth, angled back towards its throat in six shining rows. But the teeth were not intended for biting or for chewing; they were intended to anchor the victim while it used its coils to crush it.

Michel felt something bite into his leg and he screamed.

Something wrapped itself around his shoulders, a massive tentacle as strong as a man's arm. He tried to pull away, but it was useless. A cold band of muscle gripped him in a merciless vice.

It pulled him across the floor and he heard himself scream again. Another coil went around his waist. He tried to shout out but there was no breath in his lungs. The steel bands were suffocating him.

He heard one of his ribs crack.

He heard Valentine saying, ‘I want you, I need you,’ when she came to visit him in prison and now he knew with absolute clarity what she had done.

Bright lights flashed in his head. He couldn't believe it was going to end this way.

He closed his eyes and saw Adrienne, dressed in white, beckoning him with a scarlet-painted fingernail, wanting him to follow her down the wooden steps into the Saigon streets. This time she wasn’t going to leave him behind.

Michel tried to scream: ‘Adrienne!’ but no sound would come.

She had betrayed him for the last time.

♦ ♦ ♦

Valentine listened to him die. His death throes gave her no satisfaction. She had thought it would be a moment to savor. She was wrong.

It was simply justice, perfect justice.

She thought about the burns unit in the Hôpital des Invalides; a quiet and secluded world where everyone wore masks and long green sterile robes and even the air was clean and filtered and purified. For the first two weeks she had floated on the soft white clouds of the morphine.

But then the pain had started.

It was like a hot sun burning down on her skinless flesh, undulating waves of agony that had left her moaning and screaming and sobbing until the duty nurse brought her some more morphine.

She heard Michel call her name again. He was kicking the side of the van. She steeled herself to it. Soon it would be over

She thought about the day they had taken off the bandages and she had been confronted with the nightmare stranger in the mirror. Was Michel so stupid and so vain to think she could ever forgive that?

The muffled shrieks rose to a crescendo and died. There was just the whiplash hammering of the final struggle, then silence.

It was over.

EPILOGUE

Outside Mathura, on the road to Agra

Constable Sunil Bose hefted the jemmy bar in his right hand and cautiously approached the black Bedford van. He waited by the rear door. Sergeant Jagdish Sharma checked the cabin. Empty.

‘Get it open,’ he said.

The villagers said the van had been there all day, apparently abandoned. There might be an innocent enough explanation. They would find out.

Bose wedged the tip of the jemmy between the back doors and levered it open. The lock snapped with a bang.

The sergeant threw open the door.

At first he thought he was looking at a coil of incredibly thick rope. Then he saw it move and realized what it was. He gasped and took a step back.

‘Shiva,’ he whispered.

The python had tried to shape its meal first, disarticulating the joints at the shoulders. But the meal had proved too large, and the lower half of the man's torso and legs still protruded from its mouth, coated in a sticky mess of saliva. Its body obscenely bloated, the python stared back at them with unblinking eyes, helpless, a prisoner of its own victim.

Bose turned away and retched on the ground.

Sharma shook his head. He wondered what they would make of this at headquarters.

Paris

René Budjinski stood by the gravesite with his hands in his pockets. It was peaceful here, and the morning mist blanketed the noise of the city.

Noelle had been buried under a young beech. On a clear day she had an uninterrupted view of the city skyline. She would have approved.

He knelt down, removed the old flowers from the vase at the foot of the headstone and replaced them with fresh red roses. His thick brown fingers were clumsy in their arrangement, and it was some while before he was finally satisfied.

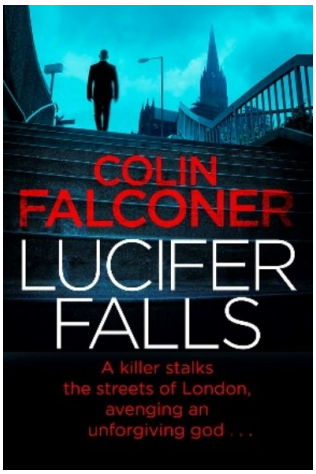
‘I have a girl staying with me now, Noelle,’ he whispered. ‘No, it's not what you think. We are not lovers. She is even younger than you. Beautiful? Yes, very beautiful. Except for these scars … she has had a tough time. I am taking care of her. She needs someone to look after her before she is ready to go back into the world. I am trying my hand at being a father at last. I know you’ll laugh at that. But I have potential, you know.’ He stood up, admiring his handiwork. ‘You would have liked her. She is a lot like you.’

He reached into his pocket for his cigarettes, took one out, then changed his mind. He put it back in the pack. ‘She's trying to make me give these up. I know you would have been with her in that. Goodbye sweetheart. Sleep well.’

He turned and started to walk towards the gates. The mist began to clear and the morning air smelled sweet.

Also by Colin Falconer:
The DI Charlie George crime series.

LUCIFER FALLS



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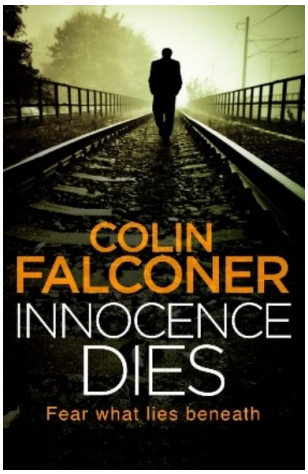

Book 3, ‘Angels Weep’ will be published in 2020.

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